

The Death of Comedy: A Novel

Mike Sennott

Table of Contents:

Case Notes	<i>Suspect: Theodore Alden Westonwell</i>	2
Chapter One	<i>March 18th: The Quest Begins</i>	6
Chapter Two	<i>March 19th: Day One of the Quest</i>	15
Case Notes	<i>Suspect: The Worst Job Ever</i>	21
Chapter Three	<i>March 21st: Day Three of the Quest</i>	31
Case Notes	<i>Suspect: Sarenhill College</i>	42

Author's note:

The Death of Comedy is the first few chapters of a novel that remains unfinished. I wrote this portion for my honors thesis in creative writing at Hamilton College from 2008-2009. I would like to continue the work someday, but for now it remains the lengthiest and most representative artifact of my fiction writing. Hope you enjoy it!

Case Notes

Suspect: Theodore Alden Westonwell

Theodore Alden Westonwell was an asshole. History has not yet forgotten that fact, not yet transfigured him into a Gandhi or Jesus. The information age still allows the circulation of apocrypha suggesting that, for all the change and magic he has wrought, there is still some debate as to whether he was a “good” person overall.

One anecdote I've heard might owe a little bit of its framework to Dickens, but it does well to demonstrate why Westonwell has not yet been canonized in the church of public opinion. According to this story, the ever-industrious Westonwell, despite his wealth and age, had been working late in the Pershing-Westonwell Solutions offices just outside of San Jose, California. The evening was supposedly chill and winterly, though that might be the Dickens. Upon leaving for the night, Westonwell was approached by a slightly harried middle-aged woman. She asked him, as she had asked every person in the course of her work, for a donation towards a charitable foundation supporting the feeding and clothing of disadvantaged children. “I'm sorry,” Westonwell sneered in reply, “I don't believe in such charities.”

Now, while I wouldn't fault anyone for interpreting this reply as impolite, I would hesitate to call it the eternally condemning mark of an asshole. I'd like to think that if I were obscenely rich, I would carry around a supply of giant novelty checks to dole out to charity on request, but Westonwell's reply was the status quo for mythical zillionaires, the sort of thing vintage Carnegie may have done in his time. Perhaps underprivileged children should have to fashion privileges out of their own bootstraps and/or wits. Perhaps that builds character. Regardless, that reply is not considered the “bad part” of this story. The bad part was what he said next.

The woman did not know that he was Theodore Alden Westonwell, but she could see from his shoes and suit coat that he was rather affluent. So, as he walked away at his brisk, measured pace and she felt the frustration of a day's work decaying from noble to pointless, she shouted at his back, "You can't take it with you, you know!"

The anecdote does not record how frustrating Westonwell's day had been, but it does note an improbable bit of malice in his eye as he rounded on her and said, "You can't take it with you? My dear, that is exactly why I will not donate to charity.

"Of course you cannot bring material goods into whatever existence or lack thereof lies beyond death," he continued. "To suggest otherwise would be absurd. However, as a corollary of your statement, it would be equally absurd to suggest that we could take our physical bodies with us. And if we cannot bring our physical bodies with us, then neither may we bring our physical minds. Surely this means we will not be able to rely on the storehouse of memory or the well-worn neural paths of experience any more than I could rely on a mansion or sled. Thus, as I see it, the kindest charitable act I can perform for these children is to withhold from them the false comforts of warm memories and the chemical addiction of happiness, for only by eliminating those oppressors can we truly live without fear of death."

The charity worker immediately became outraged at this shift from Dickensian callousness to comic book villainy. But you don't walk away from a comic book villain during his or her big speech, so the woman obligingly stood frozen to the spot before muttering something dubiously coherent about him being an insensitive madman. Then Westonwell and the charity worker both walked away, exiting stage right and left respectively. Scene.

I suppose anyone back then would have reacted negatively to so morbid a rant. If Westonwell

was as great a genius as people say, he must have known that the charity worker would not appreciate his quasiphilosophical rationale. Perhaps he was just being honest, as by all accounts his worldview was spectacularly severe and death-centric. However, if honesty was his top priority, he could have just told her that he was already donating over three-quarters of his money to charity, single-handedly funding the Westonwell Institute of Medical Science. But instead, he decided to take a trip down memento mori lane and ruin her day. Asshole move, *quod erat demonstrandum*.

When I first heard this story a few years ago, I felt so bad for the apocryphal charity worker that I made up an epilogue. I imagined that the woman probably felt terrible about the incident for three years. She must have devoted most of her spare thoughts over that period to discovering the perfect comeback to that rant, something that would cause the rich old bastard to instantly realize the joys of life and the importance of philanthropy. She remained haunted until about a year after Westonwell's death, when the Westonwell Institute of Medical Science started making headlines. Recognizing a beneficently scowling photograph on her television, she realized that the man with whom she had conversed was none other than the great humanitarian Theodore Alden Westonwell! She concordantly rationalized that their conversation must have been the impetus for him to start the Institute, not bothering to double-check how that would work out chronologically. How silly of her to have been consumed by *esprit de l'escalier*, when her muttered reaction had apparently been world-changing in its efficacy! She boasted quietly about this fact to friends, and lived happily ever after.

Thinking about it now, I'm not sure that an apocryphal charity worker learning to transmute self-loathing into self-delusion should be considered a happy ending. Maybe it's better to just retell the truth everyone knows: Westonwell was so pathologically frightened of death that he dedicated the entirety of his vast resources towards discovering an alternative. Though the Institute never exactly

discovered the secret to eternal life, they came respectably close in their formulation of Westonex, the cure for aging.

Westonex halts the body's systematic cellular process of self-destruction known as aging, along with all the nasty side effects that process ordinarily entails. It's no guarantee of eternal life – someone who doesn't age could still contract emphysema or get hit by a bus. It's closer to the Fountain of Youth, though it can't reverse aging that has already happened, only prevent further decay. A single dose of Westonex theoretically allows humans to live indefinitely, abolishing the old ninety-year term limits and allowing life to continue until impeached due to some genetic flaw or overthrown by some external hazard.

Some people credit Westonwell himself with the discovery that eventually led to the cure for aging, but most recall that his primary contributions towards Westonex were cash, a catchy if egocentric name, and an inhumanly singleminded ambition. Some people credit Westonwell's ingenious foresight or misanthropic tendencies for the fact that the drug, while stopping the aging process, also causes sterility. Of course, the Institute continues to deny it was added intentionally, calling it a natural side-effect of the drug. Either way, though most people would rather not admit it, without that side-effect the looming specter of overpopulation would surely soon devour the world whole. Especially because, thanks to good old capitalism, the cost of Westonex and its generic knockoffs has plummeted to the point where just about anyone, even a writer, can afford them.

So yes, Theodore Alden Westonwell was a great philanthropist and genius who discovered the key to functionally eternal life, and we should be thankful for that. But he was also an asshole, and I won't let history forget it. Because as wondrous as the cure for aging may be, it has caused some people an awful lot of problems.

Chapter One

March 18th: The Quest Begins

There are three reasons why I am coming home to Famous Man, Massachusetts. The first is to discover the meaning of life. It is very important that I do this within the next few weeks, but I'll probably end up putting it off until the last minute. The second is to find out what the hell is wrong with me. That question is more a personal matter: not as urgent, but nevertheless something I haven't been able to stop thinking about. I just have a hunch it might help with the first reason, or at least help me unruin my life. The third reason is that I lost my job, and the city is too expensive to live in without it. I wasn't fired or anything, but my source of income will soon finally disappear. It probably never should have existed in the first place.

It was a job I took out of desperation, perhaps colored by a bit of self-loathing, but I became too settled into a routine to quit. In a way, the impending unemployment is a *deus ex machina*, magically granting me both the excuse and motivation to escape the city and abandon that job. I had once said that I would have to be insane or dying to return to Famous Man, so at the first moment I gave serious consideration to coming home, I realized that my situation had driven me pretty close to both. I knew I didn't have much time left before it would finish the job, and this might be the last chance I get to abscond from stasis with soul intact.

So I suppose I am depressed. Unless depression is like insanity, where if you think you have it, that shows enough judgment and well-being to indicate that you actually don't have it. Either way, the apocalypse is not currently taking place, nor is my life terrible by most conventional measures. I have just come to hate and fear what I do everyday.

The problem isn't with the city lifestyle. I had come to the city hoping to cheer up and change

my life, and at worst, it just didn't help. Sure, it was overcrowded, but people left me alone, so it never really bothered me. It's better than a small town like Famous Man, where I'd feel guilted into a long conversation with someone I vaguely know every time I needed to buy groceries. Maybe I overindulged on independence, because within six months I managed to lose touch with all my city friends. By then, the city's glamour had worn off. It became nothing but a well-lit void, populated invariably by strangers, offering no real reason for me to leave my room. The city didn't depress me; it was the other way around. I managed to transmogrify a perfectly dynamic and vibrant metropolis into a small square of entropic chaos cordoned off from my universe by a clouded glass window. At the worst times, the world surrounding my apartment seemed foreign and inescapable. I imagined that a reality-warping beast of illusion lurking warily on the front stoop was to blame. A few months ago, I named it Rover.

I suppose the job itself wasn't that bad either. I had moved to the city to become a professional writer, and I succeeded. A government program called The Art and Literature of Natural Life (which, as I have alluded, is about to shut down for being useless) has been giving me grants for my short fiction. Nothing extravagant, but enough to survive in the city. I didn't have any particular illusions about the writer's life. I never filled it with lucrative movie deals, critical adulation, or exclusive social circles featuring elevated dialogue amongst surprisingly attractive luminaries. I just love writing, and I've made it my living, all without having to brave the horrors of a desk job or the hazards of fame. Plus, I was more productive than I ever imagined I could be. Rover helped me focus on getting work done. Whenever things seemed dark, I could hide behind my keyboard and fire off a literary flare to the outside world. I would always receive a reply in the form of a modest paycheck, and that was usually all the encouragement I needed.

The city, the solitude, the monotony – I've given them all due diligence in my search for the reason behind my dark state. But when I lightly strike upon them in my thoughts, expecting some immense funereal toll, each one fails to reverberate. They are just side effects, the window-dressing of a crisis.

No, the core of my discontent, the cause of bitterness and isolation, the mental hangnail compelling me to leave the city for another stint in Famous Man, Massachusetts, is *what* I had been writing.

This gets back to the second reason I'd mentioned for returning home, regarding what the hell is wrong with me. To be more specific about that problem, something terrible has happened to my sense of humor. I've always loved writing comedy: the wholesome warmth of a good clean joke, the invigorating rush of a cutting comeback, the potent bittersweet of irony. It was through comedy that I made friends, through the virtue of humor writing that I graduated from college, even through jokey admissions essays that I got into college in the first place. But somewhere along the way, by the time I had settled down in the city, something had gone horribly awry.

It must have been gradual, because it's hard to pinpoint when or how it began, but I've lost the ability to write comedy. Slowly, the population of innocent puns and absurdities in my writing began to die off, replaced by predatory ironies and insidiously jaded deadpan. I guess the stories I write now are still funny, in a certain dark way, but they are also, without fail, terribly depressing. They always end in tragedy, for no other reason than it's how, in my mind, events happen to play out.

There's nothing I can do about it. Sitcom-like social misunderstandings lead to irrevocably broken relationships. Whimsical action scenes lead to people getting hurt or killed. Every story is like a nightmare, operating with inexorable dream logic, driving each plot towards the dark, the discordant, the inverse of levity. I can't even read my own stories after having written them. They're just too depressing.

So who would want to read them? Why have I been getting paid for them? Those are good questions, ones to which I am not entirely sure of the answer. But whatever the answer may be, it all goes back to Westonwell.

After the discovery of Westonex, there were varying amounts of panic throughout the world. I don't want to get too far into it – I don't mean to explore the drug's ramifications on the world's sociopolitical landscape. I'm neither qualified nor motivated to discuss all that. The one important part, or at least the part relevant to how my job came into being, is the quandary that Westonex made for the American government. On one side, overpopulation, certain religious groups, and other pressures mandated that the government do something to stop people from taking Westonex. But there's no way to prevent any subset of the population from acquiring a medicine that enabled functionally eternal life, however reasonable the rationale may have been, without all hell breaking loose. For better or worse, the government found a middle ground. They could not legislate against taking Westonex, but they could *encourage* people not to use it. They could *educate* people about the benefits of aging naturally and expiring at an evolutionarily convenient juncture. They could fund

clinics that provide therapy to restore the aging process. Six years ago, all these ideas and more were wrapped up into a new government program called the Natural Life Initiative. In short, the Initiative would do whatever possible to glorify aging and downplay the downside of death. Granted, at no point has it been particularly effective or influential. Now, even while it still sponsors a variety of programs, I only hear people refer to it mockingly, or occasionally as a comparative exemplar of something that could never work.

The defining coincidence in my life occurred two years and a month ago, not long after I graduated from college. I was newly depressed, since I had just figured out that I could no longer write a decent joke to save my life. And because a comedy writer who can't write comedy might be fit for the Island of Misfit Toys, but not for gainful employment, I was jobless and living with my parents. In my aimlessness, I had taken to browsing the Internet rather circuitously, checking my email more often than is necessary or healthy. On this day, I was so bored that I read a political news site. As luck would have it, it featured a new post about the Natural Life Initiative's new program, the Art and Literature of Natural Life. ALNL provided grants to writers, poets, musicians, and artists who "celebrate through their work the beauty and advantageousness of life's natural conclusion, causing audiences to reevaluate the benefits of natural life progression."

"I wonder," I thought out loud, "if that means they are in the market for stories that are so depressing they make people want to die."

That was exactly what it meant, as far as I can tell. At least, they accepted my first submission,

a particularly morbid comedy-gone-awry I had lying around. The following letter appeared with my first paycheck:

Dear Mr. Winter,

Congratulations! We are pleased to note that your short story, “Another Broken Window,” meets the demanding literary standards of the Art and Literature of Natural Life®. We here at ALNL® are devoted to allowing the best and brightest artists to deliver the Natural Life Message® to homes across America. Due to your story's extraordinary merit, we have chosen to distribute it along with other selected works at Natural Life Restoration Clinics®, along with including your story in *Natural Life Initiative Presents: Stories to Live By, Volume One*®, our semiannual “best-of” anthology. In addition, please find enclosed a check for \$2,500. We thank you for your interest in the Natural Life Message®, and look forward to your future contributions!

Regards,

Farragut Pritchard

Director, Art and Literature of Natural Life

Natural Life Initiative

That paycheck let me move to the city, where I received the same letter another thirty-one times over the next two years. The only thing that ever changed was the title of the story, and

occasionally the volume of the anthology. There must have been, on average, eight Travis Winter "Stories to Live By" in each volume, though partly out of fearing exactly that, I never bothered searching for a copy. The letters never clarified what exactly was meant by the "Natural Life Message[®]," nor did any subsequent Internet search reveal additional information. As far as I could tell, they accepted anything as long as it was a downer. As an experiment, I risked submitting a story I loved, a lighthearted allegory I had written back in college about the beauty of life and love. They never even sent me a rejection letter for that one.

Over the span of two years, I served in the War On Overpopulation as a spy behind the enemy lines of laughter and aesthetic beauty. In true superspy fashion, I would flirt with those enemy combatants, only to cruelly subvert them in order to complete the mission from ALNL. If I was the sentimental type, it might have driven me insane. Fortunately, the bitterness of my own stories had inured me against whimsy just enough to survive the life of espionage. Frankly, it was the perfect job for someone in my situation, a lucky break of a magnitude that nobody could reasonably expect. Yet even in my attempts to adapt to the occupation, to mesmerize myself with monotony, I remained too aware of my past life. I would be haunted by surrealistically keen recollections of civilian toil, simple pleasures hard won as a hunter/gatherer of sincere comedy. The memories would call to me in the middle of the night, then hang up when I tried to answer, leaving me with only a vague feeling that I was aligned with evil.

That is why, when I read on a news website, the same site from which I'd first learned of ALNL, that the program's funding was being cut off, I smiled. My time in the city has been a cruel

mockery of the life I'd imagined myself having, tantalizingly close in every aspect save one maddeningly important inversion. For a while after I first submitted a story to ALNL, I tried to convince myself that exactly what I was writing did not matter as long as I was writing. Then, I tried assuring myself that my humor would return if I was just sufficiently patient. But now, I am done lying to myself. After the end of the ALNL (and two weeks of procrastination), things can finally change. I have a chance to remedy the corruption and malaise in my writing, to return triumphant to the high ground of feel-good comedy, to live the blameless life I've dreamed of. I can take stock of my life, sort out my memories, and ideally, not only find out what the hell is wrong with my sense of humor, but actually fix it.

It is a noble quest, to vanquish the countless levels of jadedness and irony in my writing, to ultimately find the treasure of being able to write a good, clean, uplifting comedy once again. Or perhaps it is a detective story, a hunt for clues through my own life, to track down the culprit behind my stories' twisted endings and haul it off to the hoosegow, if not find an excuse to shoot it. It could even be some combination thereof – maybe I am a dragonslaying private eye on a journey of self-discovery. Or maybe, just maybe, I am a struggling writer with no money, three problems, and a compulsive penchant for hyperbole. Regardless of which simile I choose to pass the time, today I am finally packing to return home to Famous Man, Massachusetts.

Now, I have made my declaration, my mission statement. My thoughts should be starting anew, bridling with purpose, deconstructing my failures and rebuilding my future. But for some reason, I just keep thinking about Westonwell again. Cosmically, this whole mess is his fault. It's his fault that my unavoidable nemesis, my patron and tormentor, the Natural Life Initiative, needed to

exist. Thus, it's Westonwell's fault that I went on writing depressing stories as long as I did, and probably, through some goldbergian contrivance of fate, his fault that I lost my sense of humor in the first place.

More importantly, it's unequivocally his fault that I only have a few weeks left to find the meaning of life. After the government started to suspect that the NLI was hopelessly ineffective, they found the courage to pass some legislation about Westonex. As of this year, to prevent overpopulation, only people under the age of twenty-five can acquire Westonex. Excepting, of course, those already twenty-five or older, who are "grandfathered" in.

If someone were to turn twenty-five this year, he or she might feel righteously shortchanged. He or she would have to decide awfully quickly whether to prolong life indefinitely, which could be especially problematic if he or she were dangerously overthinking that decision and attempting to put it off for as long as possible. I imagine that if I were in such a situation, I would be rather vexed.

But strangely enough, as my 25th birthday looms three weeks in the future, I am instead simply determined. I will use those three weeks to find the meaning of life – at least a meaning, some meaning. The gravity of this situation will strengthen my resolve, not incite my anger, despite the inconvenience, the pressure, the neurosis. Westonwell, you asshole.

Chapter Two

March 19th: Day One of the Quest

There has never been a famous person from Famous Man, Massachusetts. Since its founding in 1881, it has grown to a population of 7,260, but none of those people has managed to crack the national consciousness. In 1928, Elias Kane invented a revolutionary musical instrument he called the aetherphone, but was beaten to the patent office by The Great Usurper Leon Theremin. In 1992, Jeff Turner posted a winning record for the AAA Richmond Braves, but was never called up to the major leagues. The original bassist for postpunk band The Rocketeers, college radio mainstays during the 1980s, was from Famous Man, but he left over creative differences before The Rocketeers hit it big. There have been some suspiciously close calls, but nobody from Famous Man has ever really been famous. Nothing much ever happens there, so people talk about that a lot. Not quite enough to qualify as a mass obsession of cultish proportions, but close.

Some scientific-minded folk blame pure probability for the misfortune, but most blame a curse. According to the legends, the Famous Man Inn at the center of town was once called the Gray Fox Inn. The proprietor was looking for ways to drum up business, so he started spreading rumors that a major celebrity of the era had visited the inn. Like most rumors, the facts started to get mixed up, so exactly which celebrity changed fairly often. The owner of the Gray Fox obligingly accepted each variation, until he had an entire wall full of portraits of celebrities who had supposedly visited the inn. Eventually, the inn changed its name to the Famous Man, advertising itself as a retreat for big shots with a rustic small-town charm. No celebrity ever took up that offer, but the ploy attracted so many bored average folk hoping to catch a glimpse of a star that a small community began to rise up around the inn, eventually becoming Famous Man, Massachusetts. Legend has it that because of the

innkeeper's greed and deception, the town surrounding the inn is cursed to never be visited by a famous person, nor ever produce one.

So when I left Famous Man for college and the big city, I apparently left with the hopes of my village resting on my shoulders. It was infuriating. I really didn't care much either way about wealth or celebrity, but apparently the town's collective consciousness projected those onto me. Whenever I came home on break from college, people I only sort of knew would stop me in the streets or at the store to tell me they hoped I could get rich and break the curse. It was a nice gesture, I suppose, but it genuinely creeped me out, to the point of finding excuses to stay at school during spring and summer break.

Now, I am not sure if they still think of me as their last hope or if I have become a spectacular failure. In the former case, I'd have to graciously put up with wanton encouragements, most of them inapplicable – Dazzy Vance won his first game at 31 and still made the Baseball Hall of Fame, Einstein got failing grades in middle school. In the latter case, I'd imagine thinly veiled looks of shame on the street, perhaps women bursting uncontrollably into tears at the sight of me. Ideally, they'll have moved on to some other bandwagon, some other moderately to exceptionally talented youngster. Then, my returning home will be a non-event. I'll be just another poor soul who skipped town with big ideas of fortune and glory, only to be struck down by the curse and crawl back to Famous Man a few years later. Of course, I'd never expressed giving a damn about fame or the curse – quite the contrary actually – but I doubt that matters.

Frankly, aside from morbid curiosity, I'd rather not find out what people think. I hope my parents haven't told anyone I'm coming home. That way I could relax and focus on solving my problems instead of trying to explain them to people I only sort of know.

Regardless, I have just arrived at my parents' house. I pull into the driveway and put the car in park, but I wait a minute for the song I'm listening to to end before I shut off the ignition. Unpacking the car isn't an issue because I managed to fit everything I own into a suitcase and a backpack. After all, it's not like I'm moving in or anything – I'm just visiting for a week or two. I could think of this like my own personal post-college Spring Break, just without the connotations of adventure or fun.

I still have a key to my parent's house, but as I'm putting it in the lock, my mother flings the door open and I stumble inside.

"Whoa, hi Travis! Be careful," she says.

"Hi, Mom."

"How are you? How was the trip?" she asks, restoring the floor mat I had misplaced in my stumbling to the proper angle.

"It was fine. Uneventful. I got the new First Tigers album, so it went by pretty quickly."

"Oh, that's good. They're your favorite band. Right? You should sit down. Or, you're probably tired of sitting from the drive. So you can keep standing. Ooh, you could lie down on the couch too."

"Thanks." I keep standing. "How have things been here?"

"Oh, you know, same old same old. Your father is away in Indianapolis this week, but he's really looking forward to seeing you in a few days. Your sister has her Spring Break next week, but she's going to California with some friends. So I've just been trying to keep myself busy here. Are any of your friends around? I heard from Alan's mother that he's on break this week. Have you had lunch yet?" She starts for the kitchen in anticipation.

"Uh, well, I had a snack before I –"

"Traaavis," she sighs, rounding on me, "It's four thirty in the afternoon, and you haven't had lunch? Well, it's still too early for dinner... do you want some cereal? I picked up some Cinnamon-Os at the grocery store yesterday."

Did my mom get Cinnamon-Os just because I liked them when I was a kid? I start to shake my head – but actually, I could go for some cereal. Why not? If I'm going to start a new chapter in my life, a new quest or case or whatever, it's only appropriate symbolism that I begin with some breakfast food. "Yeah, sure." I sit down at the kitchen counter.

By the time I answer, she already has a bowl out. "So do you have any big plans while you're here? You said something on the phone about about finding yourself?"

"Yeah, something like that." The house is more or less like I remember. The floor tiles are a sandy beige instead of white. There's a new bookshelf, made of wood or an approximation thereof.

"You know, I've never understood why young people are always vacationing to Europe to find themselves. Why would their selves be in Europe? It makes much more sense to come home. You probably just left yourself lying around somewhere. You always were kind of a klutz."

"That's kind of what I'm hoping. The finding something, I mean." I haven't told my mom the specific reason I'm here. I feel like it would break her heart to hear that I can't write comedy anymore. There are probably plenty of much worse things that could lead a guy into a crisis, but I can't think of any offhand that would be harder for me to admit to. She still has a short story I wrote in high school framed on the wall. The front page is the only one visible, but it proudly displays the letter "A" written in red ink. Admitting I have lost my sense of humor would tarnish that great document, something I wouldn't have to worry about if I was only revealing myself as a heroin addict or serial killer. Thus, I wax evasive: "I just don't feel that great about myself right now. Somewhere I stopped

being the person I wanted to be, apparently, and I'd like to find out where."

"Oh..." She hands me the bowl of Cinnamon-Os. "You know you're a good person, Travis... but I don't know if I can convince you of that."

"Nope... oh, I mean, this whole thing definitely isn't your fault, or my upbringing or anything." I'm not sure what else to say, so I take a bite of Cinnamon-Os. They taste less like cinnamon than I remember, but they're still good.

"So is there anything I can do to help? Do you want me to guess where your life has gone terribly wrong?"

"Isn't that what mothers are for?"

"Hmm... well, I do think you made a mistake in letting Cassie go."

"Mom, that was in eighth grade."

"She was such a nice girl. I still think she would have been perfect for you."

"We dated for two weeks. It really didn't work out." I take another bite of cereal. This one tastes more like cinnamon. Maybe the first bite was just unlucky.

"Well, I don't know. You asked me for help." She opens a cupboard, and starts moving coffee mugs around absently. "If you don't want to talk about that, maybe we should talk about what's coming up in a few weeks. I know how you feel about Weston --"

I drop my spoon. "Hah, no, that's... I'm okay, I'd rather not talk about that right now. Alright, how about another guess as to why I'm in a crisis? What was the most distraught you've ever seen me? I mean, recently, not like when I lost the talent show in third grade or anything."

"Hmm..." She's putting a lot of thought into it. She's stopped rearranging the cupboard.

"Well, you're usually such a stoic, Travis. You never express yourself, except through your writing I

guess. The last time I saw you get really upset was during the summer before your junior year of college.”

“Right. The Worst Job Ever.”

“I'd never seen you so angry. I was frightened – you hear about jobs being soul-crushing, but I actually went to church to pray that your soul didn't get crushed. At the end of the summer, I'd never been so happy to see you leave for college. I was just as glad as you were when that job was over.”

“I don't know about that.”

Case Notes

Suspect: The Worst Job Ever

Apparently the grand tour through my life will begin with The Worst Job Ever. I've made a point of forgetting most of it, but I still remember one day early in the second week of work. I may not remember all the names or conversations exactly, but a surprising amount of it is still burned into my mind.

Something changed that day. It was the day that the sight of cozy pastel suburban houses and plastic screen doors turned revolting, when eye contact began to make me physically ill, when it became The Worst Job Ever. It wasn't the day I realized I hated the work or that I gave up trying; those both happened on my first day. It also wasn't the day I quit. I didn't stop working until another couple of weeks after this. I'd never quit a job before, and I didn't want to leave as a disappointment, doomed to spend the rest of the summer sitting around at home reflecting on what a screwup I was. Instead, I managed to put off that reflection until now. I'm still not sure what changed that day, why I remember it so well – maybe it was my sense of humor dying.

By the second week of the job, I already had to listen to angry rock music during downtime. It helped to be able to vent, to summon through the music a spectral strawman of frustration and self-loathing and tell myself work isn't *that* bad. However, the more important reason for the music was to keep myself from thinking too much as I walked to the next destination. Uncle Eli had told me that I thought too much, that I should just stick to the handbook and everything would be fine. I rather enjoyed thinking at the time, as a form of rebelling against the man if nothing else. Now, I'm sick and tired of it, but I've become too addicted to stop. In retrospect, Eli was right. If I could have stopped thinking too much, turned off those mercurial higher reasoning capacities that lead to such wonders

as hysterical self-doubt and existential crises, then things would have been a lot easier. It wouldn't have been The Worst Job Ever, just a perfectly reasonable way to survive.

Hell, even if I could avoid thinking too much right now, my sense of humor wouldn't be so irrevocably screwed, and I wouldn't currently be going through this job all over again. I probably wouldn't even care about the meaning of life.

Anyhow, this memory begins with me walking through Persimmon Way, in the elderly district of Checkerston, Massachusetts, listening to loud angry music on my earphones. Persimmon Way featured rows of garishly pale houses, most of which contained independent retirees. As such, most bits of local color came from neglect – the occasional warped driveway or rusty slanted basketball hoop. My music might have been the loudest ever played on the street, despite the fact that I was using earphones. Maybe some geezers never gave up punk rock, but if so, I never met any of them.

That morning, I had collected the clipboard of names from Uncle Eli, just like I did every morning. In my other hand, I carried a folder containing sundry fliers and pamphlets. Yes, I was once a door-to-door salesman. I hope that I am not still a door-to-door salesman, that it is not part of my fundamental essence, that I have not become a creature of awkward conversation and shameless half-truths. I think that my mind rejected that transplanted identity, and that's why the job made me so sick and revulsed. I hope.

This was well after the advent of the Internet, further still after the invention of the telephone, but there will always be the rationale that people feel guiltier about blowing you off if they have to look you in the face to do it. Personally, I found getting the door politely slammed in my face to be the best case scenario. I got to leave earlier for lunch, and they got to keep going about their lives. It was easiest for me, and easiest for the... mark? Target? Victim? But even then, even being dismissed and

ignored, I still managed to bring about guilt and discomfiture. I was a storm crow. Not a very effective one, never carrying devastating lightning or godly thunder, but always a sure sign of gloom.

As I approached a light gray house with light blue shutters, I pocketed my earphones. Being caught carrying them was grounds for termination, but mostly it would have felt strange and impolite to show them off. In retrospect, I think I just didn't want to come across as a real person. Nothing to give me even a cursory defining characteristic like enjoying music, just the standard uniform of a plain blue polo shirt and khaki slacks. It made me easier to ignore.

The last six houses had done just that. Three people not home, three who said some pointed variant of "We're not interested, thank you." All in all, I was feeling pretty good about my streak of luck, especially considering that my lunch break was in less than an hour. Unfortunately, when I rang the doorbell at this house (setting off a synthesized chime, instead of an electronic buzz), after a few brief tantalizing moments of silence, someone opened the door.

He was old, like everybody on the list. Tall pockmarked forehead, thinning hair with a bit of red left on the sides. According to the clipboard, his name was Nathan Bright.

"Mr. Bright?"

"That's me. What can I do you for?" He was jolly. It was a bad omen.

"Hello. My name is Travis Winter. I'm here on behalf of the Natural Life Initiative."

"Hmm... ah, yes, I think I've heard about that. Actually, I might have a question or two about it." Here, I tried not to look pained or disappointed, maintaining my weary sham of a smile. But inwardly, I was trying to telepathically warn him to just shut the door like everyone else, attempting to psychically project images of a fearsome black dog with raised hackles, a storm crow whipping fiendishly about on electrified gale winds, a rapidly approaching trip wire rigged to a thermonuclear

bomb (I had theorized that telepathic communication was more audible if you used hyperbole). It was to no avail: "Come in, come in," he continued genially, turning away from me to walk further into his house.

I took a single step inside.

"Please, sit down, friend." He motioned towards a brown sofa.

Fine.

The room featured various framed photographs standing on endtables and hanging on the vertically paneled faux-wood walls. After a moment, the photographs each wiped to a different image, automatically cycling through some digital memory bank. At that point, I noticed a sixty-four inch television in the room as well. Bright chose for himself a recliner across from the couch, though both were angled slightly towards the television.

"So, Mr. Winter, was it? Tell me about this Natural Life Initiative."

"The Natural Life Initiative is a federally sponsored organization seeking to foster awareness of the personal benefits and social advantages of a natural lifespan." God, I still remember that canned response word for word.

"Ah, a natural lifespan. Interesting, an interesting thought." He scratched his chin, but was still smiling. "So what brings the Natural Life Initiative to my humble abode?"

"Mr. Bright, I've been deputized to inform you about the Natural Life Initiative's new Natural Life Restoration Clinics," I replied, careful to avoid implying my own volition in this visit, "They've perfected a therapy for those whose bodies have lost the ability to age."

"You mean Westonex, don't you? I took it two years ago, back when it was still pretty expensive, before all those generic knock-offs. But it was worth every penny. I know it's not supposed

to reverse aging, but I've been feeling younger and younger ever since I took it. I feel like I could live forever, and heck, if I eat healthy and get my proper rest, I don't see why I can't!"

"Well, the Initiative would like to extend you an invitation to pay the Clinic a visit," I replied. I couldn't say "well" like Uncle Eli. His "well" was an invitation, a reluctant yet determined decision to let a trusted friend in on an intimate secret. Mine was a meaningless rhetorical crutch that sounded like stalling for time. "There's one opening right here in downtown Checkerston. The therapy will fully revitalize the aging process, and it's all completely free of charge." Here I pulled out one of the pamphlets, entitled "Natural Life Restoration Clinics®: The Doorway to the Natural Life Advantage."

"Ah, a pamphlet! May I see it?" Bright took the pamphlet and started to flip through it.

I continued, "Please, take some time to discuss these matters with your loved ones and decide if Natural Life is right for you. In the meantime, would you care to sign up for more information?"

That was what I was there for, the signature. I hadn't gotten any signatures yet, and since I needed six per day to fill the all-important "quota" Uncle Eli always went on about, I was way behind. There was something ghoulish about gathering signatures, especially ones condemning the signee to rather imminent death. It was like a Faustian bargain in reverse, asking to give up the promise of everything for the nebulous well-being of the soul.

Bright seemed to pick up on that. Without breaking his jovial countenance, he mused, "Hmm... let's see... so if I visited this clinic, it would be another few years at most before I pop off." He didn't say it pointedly, but I didn't know how to respond.

Technically, my job description wasn't "storm crow." It was "grim reaper." The Salesman of a Death, encouraging useless old folk to shove off already and make room for the young and relatively photogenic such as myself. The only thing that kept me from becoming that is that I sucked at my job.

Even if I had been all about the Natural Life Message[®], a staunch traditionalist putting the health of beneficent Mother Earth over my own selfish Hobbesian desires, a diehard believer in the NLI-sponsored studies finding evidence in a glorious afterlife, I still would have sucked at my job. I'm just not a conversationalist, especially when making jokes isn't an option. Uncle Eli was always firing off punchlines in that conspiratorial fashion of his, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the decorum of the subject matter should preclude waggishness. I wasn't any good at the reaping, but at least I was grim. If Eli had been there, he would have been exasperated that I didn't launch into a pitch about the Life Cycle Principle or Immortality Through Caring.

The silence ended when Bright suddenly became pensive. "Do a lot of people choose that option?"

"Well, it's a new treatment... but... there are people." Supposedly most of the door-to-door NLI employees regularly managed to meet quota. On my first day, when I was shadowing Eli, I watched him run circles around the Natural Life Message[®] as a tiny old woman tried to keep up. I don't think she even realized what she was signing up for.

"Gee, wild." Bright returned to his previous expression with a laugh. "And these people know they're going to die?"

Here I momentarily stopped being such a slacker and repeated another one of the NLI's canned responses. I must have been angry at the guy for ruining my day, for disintegrating my barrier of procrastination and springing upon me the hysterical internal dialectic between myself and my job, the strife between my self-doubts and my other self-doubts. Or maybe death honestly just didn't seem that bad at the moment, or maybe I became possessed by one of those signature-seeking demons. Whatever the reason, I put some effort into my job for the first time, my voice becoming

preternaturally calm and measured: "Of course. Everybody dies, eventually even those who don't age. Death exists for a reason. It's a vital part of life, society, and nature. Death doesn't have to be a source of fear and hesitation, it can be a gateway to peace, fulfillment, even transcendence." I pulled out another pamphlet, called "Choosing the Religion That's Right For You."

Bright laughed again, the same laugh as before. It wasn't a wry chuckle or cynical snicker, it was an honest guffaw from the gut, a bit breathless at the end. It's because of that laugh that I can't hold anything against Bright. He wasn't the bad guy. He wasn't perversely seeking to trap salespeople and torture them with awkward silences. He was an old man who didn't get out of the house often, and he was happy to have a visitor. If he had signed up for the clinic, I like to think I would have quit the job then and there, expectations be damned. Instead, he replied, "I'll tell you what, Mr. Winter. First, I'm going to finish up watching this set of 2,000 great films that I'd ordered a while back. Then I've got the 1,000 greatest action flicks, the 1,000 greatest mysteries, and the 1,000 greatest comedies. After that, I'll get back to you, unless I forget any of the plots in my old age and want to watch them again."

"That's fair enough," I quickly answered with more than a bit of relief, "Thank you for your time and consideration."

He didn't stand up until I did, but as soon as I left my seat he hastened to hold the door open. "No, thank you for stopping by. Very interesting thoughts, friend. Have a good day."

Thinking about it now, that conversation was far more cordial than I had previously remembered. Bright was neither a victim nor an adversary, just a bemused old man. What bothered me then, and still does, is that there should have been conflict. My self-loathing needed something to

happen, some gratification. I was the bad guy, right? You can't just ask some to stop living, right? He should have ripped apart "Choosing the Religion That's Right For You." He should have gone on a sprawling, implausibly philosophical tirade like Westonwell may or may not have. He should have grabbed the clipboard, held it aloft, and declared, "Yes, I will sign up, because I don't want to live in a world where the Natural Life Initiative is going door-to-door! You killed me, Travis Winter! Murderer!" But nothing ever really happened, and that tore me apart more than any conflict could have.

At least Uncle Eli was pissed, in his own salesmanly way, when I returned at the end of the afternoon with no sign-ups for the new clinic. As soon as I knocked on his door, clipboard and folder in hand and earphones safely in pocket, he threw it open hurriedly with eyes wide. He glanced at me, then the clipboard, then he said, managing to sound both exasperated and manic, "You... no? No one? Again?" He paused, his features strained. "Ahhhhkay. Okay. We're going to make this work, Trav. If you pick up another few blocks next week, you can still finish above quota. You just gotta... you just gotta stick to the playbook, be polite, be courteous, and this will all work out, Trav."

"Thanks, Uncle Eli... but I don't know if I'm cut out to be a salesman." He wasn't actually my uncle, just an old family friend that I had vaguely known growing up. He was a gaunt, middle-aged man, with a dark mustache and wide eyes set off by a laboriously assembled comb-over.

"Sure you are, Trav, sure you are. You're a smart kid, your mom and dad are always telling me you're a real smart kid. Anyone can learn to go door-to-door. You'll be making quota in no time." He patted me on the shoulder.

I recoiled a bit, then grimaced sheepishly. "I'm not sure I can learn. There's... just a part of me that doesn't want to."

“Aw, don't say that, Trav. Trav, your parents wanted you to have a job this summer, so you could learn about the real world. In the real world, you've gotta talk to people, Trav. You've gotta sell things. How are you gonna have a job interview, or get a hot date, haha? You've gotta know how to sell, man. You've gotta press buttons, you've gotta do what you need to. And you know it. I know you can do it, Trav. And you've just gotta... for yourself, for your future, for your mom and pop. You've gotta make quota.”

This was the bravest thing I said all summer: “I don't know... I don't think I can do it. I think the door-to-door operation would work out better without me.” From there, it was downhill.

“But, Trav... okay. You know what? I'll be honest with you, Trav. You deserve that. You're a smart kid. Trav, we've been having some trouble. We can't afford to let anyone else go. We really can't. We need you, Trav. If you leave, then everybody else will have to pick up your quota, and we'll really be.... in trouble.”

“Really? I get the feeling that I'm not helping that much.”

“Trav, I... we need you, Trav.” He looked nervously back and forth, then spoke again in a whisper, staring me straight in the eye as I looked at his hallway floor, “Look... I heard this rumor. From a guy in corporate. A friend. And they don't joke around at corporate, Trav. He said that if the Initiative doesn't make quota, the program gets cut, and the government moves on to Plan B.”

“So then everyone would lose their jobs.”

He sighed. “Yeah, Trav. But that's not it. No, that isn't the... you haven't heard of Plan B?”

“Not in this context, no.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I've heard some things... some rumors. I've heard overpopulation is killing this country, Trav. Killing it. It's far worse than anyone's letting on, but they're fudging the

numbers so people don't panic. And... if the NLI doesn't do enough about it, if we don't get enough senile old fogies to kick Westonex, the government's got a backup plan. They're gonna... they've got this virus they had their scientists make. They're gonna put it in the water supply. And all those vampires who've taken Westonex... it's gonna kill 'em all, Trav. Every single one of them. They're gonna say it was a complication with the drug. But we'll know the truth. You and I will know what happened."

I was too tired for this. "Uncle Eli, do you really think they would do that? That they would kill millions of people in cold blood to solve a problem that probably isn't even as bad as you're making it out to be?" Was there even really a centralized national water supply?

"Heh, no... no, Trav. Of course not. But, I mean... just in case. Just in case they would. Do you really want to take that risk, Trav? Are you sure you want to walk away, and let your parents down, and take that chance? Or would it really kill you to stay and give another shot to helping out your old Uncle Eli?"

And so, I didn't quit that day. The shame I would have felt about failing, driving Eli to a breakdown, telling my parents that I'd never be able to handle the real world... it wasn't close to the guilt I felt as a storm crow, but it was enough to paralyze me into inaction. So, guilt battled shame, and when I couldn't bring myself to quit, my body and mind did it for me. I couldn't say anything, so I coughed. I got sicker and sicker until I couldn't leave my bed. I'd always told everyone it was because of the stress and lost sleep, but I think it was purely psychosomatic, my subconscious looking out for me. Either way, when the summer ended, I made a miraculous and full recovery. I think.

I haven't seen Eli since that summer, which is mostly a conscious decision. Maybe he's on

meds, or maybe the thought police sent him to Room 101. Or maybe he's still out there on the streets, haunting unsuspecting villagers to death in their own homes with bad jokes and guilefully crafted feelings of guilt.

Chapter Three

March 21st: Day Three of the Quest

After looking at that summer again, The Worst Job Ever does not seem to be quite as bad as I had remembered it. In fact, I should probably stop capitalizing it. There must be worse jobs. For instance, assassins are paid to kill people in a far less ambiguous fashion. In the long history of contract killing, there must be some guy who found out too late that the revolutionary he garroted was his own brother. Or maybe some billionaire was targeted because he gave so much to charity that it made all the other plutocrats look bad, and a young assassin was forced to carry out the hit or be killed himself. Those would be fine examples of a less desirable work experience.

Furthermore, if the job was really that bad, I wouldn't have been working with the NLI again these past few years. Instead of sending them a story when I saw that they were giving out grants, I would have sent them a message saying, "In special consideration of the embarrassment and self-loathing that marked my last relation with the Natural Life Initiative, I refuse to contribute to your morally screwy cause. No matter the money, no matter how few other jobs are out there, no matter how much I want to be able to say I'm a writer, I will never write for the NLI." But I found it in my heart to give them another chance. I wouldn't have done that for the organization responsible for killing my sense of humor.

However, all that evidence is anecdotal. There's a very real and incontrovertible reason why the summer salesman job can't be responsible for my inability to write comedy: even after confronting the experience, and to an extent coming to terms with it, I still can't write a quality humor story. I had hoped that reliving the memories would help my comedic soul return to being carefree. Liberated from the oppression of being paid to persuade, freed from the fear of forever becoming a salesman, I should ideally be able to once again act as observer, pointing out foibles and hypocrisies in a wry yet good-natured manner. However, it seems like none of those hopes are likely to play out. For the past couple days since I arrived in Famous Man, I've been working on another story, but I can see that it's not going to end up well.

Instead, I have only discovered another compounding problem: I really need to get out of the house. In the city, I was generally content to be agoraphobic, but in a cruel irony, I feel compelled to do something now that I'm in a town with nothing to do. I think it might be part of the magic of parents.

This problem should be easier to solve, at least temporarily. Earlier today, I got a call from my friend Alan, who I haven't seen since the year I left for the city and he left for college. He's at home in Famous Man on Spring Break, and had heard that I was in town (our mothers had talked at the grocery store). I'm currently on my way to meet him at the Barbecue Eagle to catch up. It should be interesting. I'm curious as to whether his opinions about the meaning of life have changed much.

I drive into the parking lot of the Barbecue Eagle, a big adobe rectangle of a restaurant across

the street from the Famous Man Inn. Their parking lot has expanded. It's now far bigger than is necessary for a town this size, and even though it's six-thirty in the evening, it's less than half-full. Their logo hasn't changed, though: it's still an eagle wearing a barbecue apron.

Looking around for Alan as I step through the door, I'm soon accosted by a hostess. "Hi, welcome to the Barbecue Eagle! How many?"

"Oh, ah, two. Waiting for someone."

"Great, let me know as soon as you're ready."

I take a menu to look over while I'm waiting. It's laminated and spans multiple pages, unlike the old paper menu, and it now has pictures of select "recommended" food items. It even has a "Healthy Choices" page for low-fat items. I'm okay with the bigger parking lot and the polished menu, but the Barbecue Eagle should not have a health food page. Doesn't it go against everything they stand for?

"Looking over the Healthy Choices?" says a voice over my shoulder. It's Alan.

"Hey, man. Good to see you." I turn around. From the looks of things, Alan hasn't changed much at all. He still has the same bad posture and quixotic attempt at facial hair as he had in high school. He's wearing a black t-shirt with a stylized drawing at its center of him fighting a wolf with a sword. At least, I'm assuming it's supposed to be him. The sword-wielding guy has the same spiky brown hair as Alan, and the same t-shirt. I point to the menu. "What happened to this place?"

"Their central office standardized everything. Design and menus and such."

"Wait, Barbecue Eagle is a chain?"

"Yeah, I know. I just found out a couple months ago when I saw one in Florida. It's strange."

He shakes his head in disbelief.

After a brief reverent silence, the hostess returns. "Oh good, it looks like you're ready to be seated." She leads the way to a table close by. "Have you been to Barbecue Eagle before?"

"Yeah." For whatever reason, whenever I meet up with Alan we end up eating here. When you meet with a friend, you're obligated to do something, but neither of us is very good at handling the pressure of deciding what to do, even if it is just a restaurant choice. So our combined inability to think of somewhere other than the Eagle has become a tradition. Plus, the Eagle has excellent pulled pork.

"Great. Then I'll leave you to think about your order. A waiter will be here shortly."

As soon as she leaves, Alan starts to speak excitedly. "So wow, it's been like three years since I've seen you. How have things been? How'd you like the city?"

I shrug. "Eh, it was alright. Not much happened. Things are going okay." Even on my better days, I always find the obligatory exchange of pleasantries to be awkward. That's one of the good things about being friends with Alan – this part of the conversation never lasts long. I'm not very good at pretending the things that happen to me are interesting, and he can only go so long before talking about a new movie or rock album.

"That well, huh? Sweet."

"How about you?"

"Decent to super-decent. College is pretty rockin', just like I'd thought. It makes high school look like... I dunno, high school. Classes are fun. Parties are fun. Having too much free time is fun. Everything is... fun," he concluded, slowly nodding, satisfied at his phrasing.

"Cool. Yeah, college is good times. Enjoy it while it lasts," I respond, perhaps a bit more wistfully than I intended.

“Oh, don't worry. I've got a plan. There's... oh hey, which of these majors sounds the most useless? Art history or comparative literature?”

“That's tough. I think art history could probably get you a job at a gallery or something, right?”

“True. That is a risk. I like comp lit classes more anyway.” He trails off and starts reading the menu. It's fallen upon me to resume the conversation.

“So your master plan is to be as useless as possible?” I ask nonjudgmentally.

“That's only the first step, of course.”

“No, no, I like it. It keeps things low-pressure. That seems healthy.”

“Exactly.” The waiter shows up. As per usual, I order the pulled pork plate, and Alan gets chicken fingers. After the waiter leaves, Alan looks to make sure he's gone, then says, “Good. For a while I was worried you were actually going to order off the Healthy Choices menu. Hah, that would have been too much for me to take – the Eagle being a chain, and you being all... old and mature.”

Old? “Seriously? Man, you're older than I am.”

He grins. “No I'm not.”

“Gah.” We've had this conversation before. “Just because you don't look any different doesn't mean you haven't gotten older. You've learned stuff, right? New experiences, new opinions, or something?”

Alan switches from his slacker's drawl to some vaguely British supervillain impression. “But what if I haven't learned anything? What if, for example, I've only taken comp lit and art history classes?”

I burst out laughing. “What? That's the stupidest evil plan I've ever heard.”

He goes back to his normal voice. "Wait, that's not the whole thing. See, I figure after I graduate, I can go to work for a while, build up some money, then go to college somewhere else."

"Would they let you? You can't get two different undergrad degrees, can you?"

"I dunno." He shrugs. "If not, I can always lie on the application or change my identity or something. Ooh, if I could get a new identity, then I could leave debt behind too. But yeah, I think that would be fun. I could go to all sorts of schools, preferably ones warmer than where I am now. I might try changing social cliques too. I've tried 'lovably quirky semi-geek,' and it's alright. But maybe I could practice some sport a lot and be a jock, or save up money a few more years and be preppy. After I've gone through college a few times, I bet I'll know enough to be that cool operator guy who gets all the girls."

"Huh." I give the plan thought for a minute. I bet he'll have forgotten about it by the time he graduates. "To be honest, that's a little weird. Won't you eventually be this secret old guy picking up college-age girls?"

"Eh. I figure by then, enough people will have come up with the same plan that it won't matter. I won't be the only dude who's not graduating for the first time, and those hypothetical college girls might be older than I am."

For whatever reason, the thought turns my stomach a bit. The discomfort is only momentary, luckily – it would be tragic to lose my appetite at the Barbecue Eagle. "I dunno. It still kind of strikes me as creepy."

"What can I say? I'm a vampire." Alan makes what I'm assuming is supposed to be a vampire noise, then looks sheepish. "That was supposed to be a vampire noise. I've gotta work on that. I'm just so psyched that people like me get 'vampire' as our derogative term. How did that happen? It's

not hurtful, it's just awesome."

"Well, it's mostly the unaging thing, though there is the whole connotation of soulless evil. But yeah, overall you Westies did pretty well linguistically."

"Whoa, not cool," Alan interrupts gravely. "Don't use that word."

"What? Which word? Since when is Westie –"

"Gah. Brand name proliferation, dude. Westonex isn't the only drug that stops aging. If you use that word for people who don't age, people will start equating them with Westonwell-Pershing. That's a killer for smaller competing companies also trying to market the fine product of eternal youth. Speaking of which, dude, have you –"

"Nope!" I interject. I still don't want to think about that yet.

"You mean you –"

"Nope! I am not talking about this. I still need time to make up my mind."

"But your birthday is –"

"Nope! I'm not going to talk about that. I'm just not. I need to work out some stuff first."

"But I have opinions," he whines. "They're valuable." He sighs exaggeratedly just as the waiter returns with our food.

There's a moment of reverent silence as we both admire our meals and start digging in. "So, wait," Alan continues between bites of onion rings, "This may be a terrible asshole thing to ask – like, I'm not sure if this is the type of thing that people ask, but what kind of stuff do you have to work out?"

"It's mostly about my writing."

"Oh yeah, I forgot to ask. How's that going?"

"About the same." I take a deep breath. "It sucks."

Alan smiles. He has the same smile for sympathy as he does for sarcasm, but I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt. "Is that whole not being able to write comedy thing back again?" he asks.

"Kind of. It never went away."

"Gah. That does suck." There's a silence, and I use the opportunity to take a bite of pulled pork. Then, he suddenly looks up. "Wait, so what's the deal with that whole thing? Writer's block? Or is it something more... *sinister*?"

"Things just end up being more depressing than I'd intended. All the time. I'll start what I think will be something funny, and it will end up going terribly wrong."

Alan emphatically dips a chicken finger in queso cheese and tilts his head. "Can that really happen for like three years straight? Wouldn't the law of averages prevent it or something? Are there even that many ways things can go to shit?"

"I can give you an example, if that will help."

"Yeah, go ahead. I can try to fix it or whatever." Alan finishes the chicken finger and starts rapidly tapping his finger on the table.

"Alright. So here's an idea I've been working on the past couple days. It's a fantasy, I guess, because it's about a teenage dude at a school for wizards. Anyhow, this guy is screwing around one day and ends up accidentally inventing a love potion. He's not quite sure what to do at first. But then he starts selling it to kids in his classes. It's good fun for a while. He becomes really popular because of it, and all these students are falling in love, sometimes in comically mismatched pairings, and these stuffy teachers are trying to find out what's going on."

"Awesome. Like Harry Potter meets teen sex comedy. What could possibly go wrong with

that?" He laughs. *"What could possibly go wrong?"*

"Well, one day he sells some of the potion to a really sketchy guy. A wizard with a shaved head and a mustache, and tattoos. And as this sketchy guy leaves, the protagonist starts to have second thoughts about the whole enterprise. He starts to think, 'Wait, what am I doing? This love potion could be used for evil, because it essentially robs people of their free will in romantic matters. I've made a huge mistake.'"

Alan shakes his head. "Well, yeah, if you want to get all moral about your teen sex comedy, things like that are bound to happen. But dude, you can still save it. He could realize that people aren't being sketchball date rapists, and that the world is wonderful, and then there could be a corny pop song and the credits roll!"

"Well, I tried. I honestly did. I started thinking of what else this creepy guy would want with a love potion. And I ended up going with that he drank it himself. That's what all the students were doing. They were just drinking the love potion, because it would basically get them this crazy high, where they would just love everything, really intensely."

Alan's finger-tapping stops. "Well, fuck. I guess that's better than the alternative. I mean, it's not *too* bad an ending. The main character makes a standard moral decision, maybe becomes an unpopular outcast again, but is happy with himself. It's... social commentary, kind of?"

I sigh. "Well, that's not the ending. It turns out that the love potion uses up all the dopamine in people's brains, so if they take it a few times they can't feel love or even happiness anymore without it. So everybody gradually becomes sad or pissed off, and they get more and more desperate for the love potion. The whole thing escalates kinda quickly, and he can't keep up with the demand because he only has these limited supplies. It ends with him in his room making the last batch that he can

make, and this angry mob of students bursts in and basically tears him apart." I shrug, then take another bite of the pulled pork.

"Geez." Alan pauses, then nods. "Okay, we can learn some things from this. First of all, never mix science with magic. That always ends terribly. Second of all, even if you're thinking too much, your characters don't need to. They can be stupid and happy. Then your stories will be stupid and happy, which is what you want, right?"

"Well, ideally they'd be smart and happy, but I'd settle for that."

"I dunno, smart *and* happy seems like a pretty tall order to pull off." He pokes at a chicken finger with his fork. "If television has taught me anything, it's that smart people are always solving horrible murders, being tormented by their dumber families, or debating politics; and dumb people are always hanging out on beaches, dancing in music videos, or debating politics. Just keep things simple. Fuck subtlety and layers of meaning." He says this last part in an overtly sarcastic tone, as if in disgust at subtlety being so high and mighty.

"Hmm. That actually might be a good idea." I'm deciding on whether I should say what I'm thinking, so I give it a few moments of eating to see if Alan has anything important to say. Then, I preface it with a brief self-deprecating laugh. "Hah. You know, this probably sounds stupid, but I was kind of hoping that there's something wrong with me, that I can just fix and I'll magically be able to write like I did when I was younger. That I can't write comedy because my life went wrong at some point... something tragic that I've forgotten for some reason. Maybe it just doesn't seem tragic to me because I'm in it."

"Or maybe it's so tragic that you've blocked it from your memory."

"Right."

“Well, that's not mutually exclusive with overthinking things. My theory is that your writing got fucked up because you went to college to study comedy. You had to abstract comedy, and study it, and formalize it, and I think that just killed it. Comedy is like a butterfly. If you look at it through a microscope, you'll crush it. If you look at it through a magnifying glass, and it's sunny, you'll light it on fire. I'm not sure what would happen if you put it in an x-ray machine, but that might also light it on fire. Anyhow, it wouldn't seem tragic to you, because college is fucking awesome, but it seems like that sort of study would just ruin humor. I don't know how you could take apart a joke over and over without seeing it as... a dead bug. I've been saying it all along.”

Now our meals are just about finished. Alan really had been saying all along that studying comedy would kill it. Maybe he's right. Come to think of it, some of those classes were unsettling at best. Maybe Sarenhill, as much as I loved it, was a tragedy.

Case Notes
Suspect: Sarenhill College

To be continued...