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## Bobby Valentin's Newsletter

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## BOBBY VALENTIN'S NEWSLETTER

### *Introduction*

I AM PLEASED to announce that I am walking without crutches again. These are dark times. It is thanks only to your support that I have endured this with a minimum of pain. Granted, it's hard to tell what the minimum is here. I might have a whole different concept of "minimum" right now had support been forthcoming from all parties. Cindy Speyer, for instance. It is not commonly known that, the night after my accident, Cindy Speyer came to me in the corner of Joe Thompson's living room (where I was icing my heel) and told me she needed to speak to me in private. She helped me across the room and dragged me into Joe's closet. No one was looking. We lay down beneath the hanging clothes. She undressed. I suggested she hang her clothes up on hangers. I was joking. She did it anyway. Without a word she undid my fly.

Afterwards she promised to come over to my place later on and massage my legs. She never came. I waited for several days. A week later I called Cindy's house. Her roommate answered. She told me that Cindy had moved to another city. That very night I saw Cindy at Rat Bar, drinking shots of Wild Turkey with Sarah Johnson, my ex. I know they saw me—how can you ignore a man on crutches?—but you wouldn't have thought so by the way they were trying so hard *not* to see me. I ask: why is it such a big deal to come to me, to ease my pain?

You will recall that I first sustained the injury to my heel when I fell—or jumped—or was pushed—off Joe Thompson's porch at a party on June 17. There are many stories. Some have sworn it was the porch itself that caused me to fall—that it was listing with the weight of all the people standing on the south end of it. A rotting support beam, an odd impulse, a malignant elbow? At the time, Cindy Speyer had enough compassion to come over and comfort me, and for a few moments that sufficed. I regret that with the passing of time these affections were somehow lost.

## *Opening*

I am living in the Western United States, shacked up with a woman who until recently had never slept with someone from the East. Our horizons have been mutually broadened. We like to get shitty every night of the week: whiskey and coke, bourbon and coke, bourbon...

At bars I attract transients who've already tried talking to everyone else. One evening I spoke with a man who'd fallen out of the back of a semi earlier in the day. There was a gob of dried blood stuck to his cheek, and his thumb was severed. "Yeah, I just got out of a coma. I didn't go to the hospital or nothing, because, well, first I was blacked out, and I wasn't going anywhere, and then when I woke up I figured, all right, I'll go over to Claim Jumper's. I guess I haven't yet determined what the long-term effects of this decision will be."

My new girl came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. She licked my ear. I studied the blood on the man's face, which resembled sealing wax, and gave my undivided attention to his story. My girl stuck her hands in the back of my jeans, and I swatted them away. She slipped off to play pinball.

The man said, "I'm only drinking hot chocolate tonight, on account of my coma. The hot chocolate is free. Hey, did you check out that ass?" He pointed at my new girl's ass. She was playing pinball. She rotated her shoulders and thrust her pelvis into the machine. I stared at the blood on the man's face more intently. "I met a girl here one night, she works over at the motel. I went to see her at work the next day, but they said she wasn't there, even though her car was parked out front. I said, well her car's parked out front. Will she be coming back? They said she wasn't there. I can't understand people sometimes." The man pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and showed me his watch. "See this watch? It's a Seiko, a real good watch. I found it out in the back of that semi today. Not bad, huh?"

Later my new girl and I made it in the bathroom of the Claim Jumper's Casino, on the steps of the courthouse, along the river, sixteen times from one end of the bridge to the other, on the top of some scaffolding that was up against the old hotel downtown. Half the time I didn't bother to pull down my pants. Neither of us got off. When we tried to climb down from the

scaffolding my new girl's hand slipped on the metal cross piping, and she became scared. I wedged my feet in the cracks between the wooden planks and lowered her to the ground. When we got back to my place we didn't want to do it anymore. Disappointed, we sank into bed. My new girl lay a heavy thigh across my legs and burrowed her head into my armpit. When I woke up at five-thirty she was on the other side of the bed, curled up, facing the wall. I tapped her on the shoulder, and she rolled back to me.

### *Quarterly Report*

An update on Bobby Valentin's efforts to retrieve his possessions:

**\*\***A Plymouth State varsity sweatshirt, appropriated by Lisa Boudreau: I was walking along the esplanade, watching the Labor Day fireworks, and I ran into Lisa in the parking lot of Burbeck's, standing near the port-o-sans. She was wearing my Plymouth State varsity sweatshirt. "Hello, Bobby," she said.

Hello Bobby? I told her, hey, nice sweatshirt. She looked down at it. "Thanks," she said. "Uh, is this yours? I can't remember."

I asked her how many other guys she dated went to Plymouth State. She rolled her eyes and said, "I guess you want it back. Look, I'll bring it by next week."

Yeah, I said. I'm sure you'll come by. I'll be seeing that sweatshirt again real soon.

"Well what the hell? It's cold, I don't have a jacket. I'm not even wearing anything underneath, Bobby. I can't give it back right now."

She had a point. But I knew that if I didn't get it then I'd never have it back. That night I was wearing a different sweatshirt. It said Monet in the 90's; it was white, with a smear of green and blue lily-pad in the middle. It was from the exhibition that came to the MFA a couple of years ago. I got it from Cindy Speyer, who I think got it as a present from an old boyfriend. I liked the sweatshirt I was wearing, but my Plymouth State shirt had sentimental value to me, and I wanted it back.

I pulled off the Monet in the 90's sweatshirt and said, here, you can borrow this one and bring it back to me tomorrow. I want that sweatshirt back now, please.

Lisa held the Monet sweatshirt by the sleeve out in front of

her; you'd think I'd just handed her a dead pigeon. "God, you're a fucking freak." She looked around. "Where am I supposed to do this?"

Lisa, there are sixteen toilets lined up here. Pick one.

She made a face. "Great," she said. She walked to an empty stall and got in.

It was a cold night. I stood in the dusty parking lot in my undershirt, shivering. A few seconds later this skinny guy in a grease-stained Aamco repair shirt came out of the john. He had a stringy moustache. He came over to where I was standing and began looking around, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He caught my eye. "Yo, what's up?" he said, nodding his head. I nodded back. Cool shirt, I said. He nodded his head again.

Lisa came out wearing the Monet sweatshirt. She threw my sweatshirt at me, and I put it on. I smelled perfume as I pulled it over my face. Lisa was subdued. The skinny guy said, "What the hell is this?" "Nothing," Lisa said. "I'll explain later." To me she said, "I'll bring this by next week." She looked down at her chest. "Hmm. It's a pretty cool sweatshirt."

That was a few weeks ago. I don't think I'll see the Monet sweatshirt again. It's too bad, because it had a certain amount of value to me, too.

\*\*That Al Green record I can never remember the name of: I started dating Sarah Johnson two winters ago. We got to know each other at a party I was having at my place. It was an after-hours party, the sort of party we were always throwing after the bars closed. It was January, a couple of weeks after New Year's, and we were carrying on as if it was all still a holiday—drinking on Thursday nights, beer and omelets on Sundays while we watched the playoffs. We did that every year, trying to prolong the party, making it maybe as far as the Superbowl, maybe into the early weeks of the first Sunday NBA broadcasts, before we started calling in sick on Mondays, sometimes Mondays and Tuesdays. Sometimes people lost their jobs, and left town. A fun time of year, a time of transition.

I would have never become interested in Sarah had she not taken the stereo hostage that night. It was three in the morning. She started putting on albums I didn't know I owned: Johnny Mathis, The Troggs, Curtis Mayfield, songs from Fiddler on the Roof. Every time she put on something different someone would

shout, What is this crap? Finally people turned to me, the host, for satisfaction. I went to talk to Sarah, who was swaying in front of the turntable. Her eyes were closed. People are getting restless, I said. I think we should play something different.

"You don't like the music?" she asked, snapping her fingers.

Well, I think it's fine.

"OK. It's your house, isn't it?"

I sat down again. We listened to Barry White, Edith Piaf, the Star Wars soundtrack, John Williams conducting the Electric Moog Orchestra. People grumbled. Where did these records come from? I asked myself.

I sat and watched my friends leave—one at a time, in groups of three and four. By four-thirty Sarah and I were the only ones left. She had found the Al Green record, and was playing the third song over and over:

*Let me be the one you come running tooooooo*

*IIII've never been uh-untrue*

She continued to dance, and I sat and watched her. The sun started to come up. She danced while I made coffee and toast. When I handed her a mug and plate she stopped dancing and said, "Oh, thanks. Hey, can we eat out on the porch?"

It's twenty degrees outside, I told her.

"Oh, yeah. It's just that I'm so hot right now. It's OK, I'll sit here." She sat on the floor by the stereo and began eating.

She ate the toast, and drank three cups of coffee. I drank coffee, but I didn't eat anything. I watched her eat just as I had watched her dance, with no thought toward my other guests.

In early spring Sarah and I had a fight. She took Al Green off the turntable, opened the front door, and hurled the record across the street. I watched it sail over the telephone wires and skip off the roof of my neighbor's house. It knifed into some bushes. Sarah left. I searched for about an hour, but couldn't find it. A few days later I went to look again. I found it nestled in the shrub branches beneath my neighbor's bathroom window. I pulled up my sleeve and reached in to get it. As I was extracting it from the bushes the window opened. My neighbor appeared above me. "Yeah," he said. "I've been wondering how the hell that got there. Who is it?"

Al Green.

He nodded. "Great stuff. Think it will still play?"

I didn't find out until the next weekend, when Sarah and I made up. She started coming over to my place again, playing the records that may or may not have been mine. Al Green with his philosophy of love was, as usual, a popular choice.

\*\*The ceramic picture frame Sarah gave me last Christmas, which I really liked, even if I did say, What the fuck is this? when I unwrapped it—the one she took back last August: I kept a picture of Sarah and me in it. Sarah took it back because she didn't want me to keep a picture of her. She came to my apartment on a Saturday. A hot day, the type of hot that drove the people on my block into their basements. They'd hide down there with their radios and pitchers of Kool-Aid and watch for the legs that scurried by the windows above their heads. Any legs seen on those days belonged to outsiders—without a doubt, since we were all inside. I suppose those sweltering August afternoons were our one good opportunity to gather some intelligence about the "foreign element" in our neighborhood. I liked to lounge in the laundry piled in front of the water heater. The water heater was cylindrical, and white, with pipes elbowing out of the top in all directions. The previous tenant had painted NASA lengthwise along the cylinder in red enamel. I reclined back in the soiled clothes, breathed their mustiness, and looked through the basement window. The legs always appeared from out of nowhere; I never heard the footsteps because my basement was soundproof. It was impossible to focus on the scene outside for very long because practically nothing happened. My eyes strayed to other things: the insulation peeling off the ducts; forgotten objects that had never belonged to me, the rubber clown with tooth marks in it, a child's squeeze toy-turned-dog's chew toy, gathering dust beneath the workbench; parabolas of moisture along the top edge of the concrete. When someone did walk past I caught it out of the corner of my eye, only looked up in time to see the window empty once again, to retain only an imagined memory of the legs, whether male or female unknown to me.

I happened to be looking out the window when Sarah walked by. Her thin calves and the hem of her green sun dress cut across the telephone pole and mail box I'd been admiring. I liked their

shapes. Sarah was coming to my house. I was lucky I saw her. From the basement I would not have heard her knock. I ran up the stairs and opened the front door before she had finished climbing the steps. She hadn't come with anything to say. We sat in the front room for a few minutes. She slouched on the hassock with her head in her left hand, while she shook her right hand up and down, intending to make some point, but all she could say was, "I don't understand." I urged her toward comprehension with my own hands, touching my chest and making sweeping gestures in her direction, had I invented sign language I would have created such a gesture, it would have meant, What is it? And I was repeating, I don't understand either, I don't understand. What is it? I asked.

Finally she said, "You have no depth of feeling." I didn't understand. Is that the problem? I asked. She didn't answer. I became quite tired then. I watched as she shook her head and stood up to go. I switched from a sitting position to a reclining position on the couch. Sarah saw the picture of us in the ceramic frame, resting on a wooden apple crate. Sarah's mother had taken the picture on the day of someone's christening—Sarah's niece, I think. We had gone to the christening hung over. Somehow the mere fact we were being such good citizens—feeling so crappy, and yet still getting out of bed and showering and dressing up and going to talk to Sarah's relatives—thrilled us. Sarah was wearing a black and white checkered retro-style dress; I was wearing a striped sportcoat I'd once found draped over a garbage can in town. In the photo our heads were pressed together, and we were standing in front of a fountain. We were laughing; we'd been pretending to butt heads, like goats. When we first saw the picture after it came back from the developers I said, It's very retro. It seems as if it could have been taken thirty years ago. This is good, because it means that it will also be difficult to place our love in a particular historical context.

She took the photograph, with the frame. Months later, as I was preparing to leave for good, I found the frame in my mailbox. The picture was in it. At one time it had been torn in half, then taped back together. I suspect at first she'd wanted to hold onto the image of herself, but had then changed her mind. It was fairly well doctored, only a thin line visible between us.

**\*\***My watch, which I hadn't noticed I'd lost until I got it back: Cindy Speyer returned my watch a few weeks after Joe Thompson's party. She came to my place. We stood in my front door for a few minutes trying not to say anything dumb. In the end we agreed it had been a mistake.

Six months later, when he was moving out, Joe found Cindy's Monet in the 90's sweatshirt gathering dust in the back of his closet. He asked me if I wanted it. I said, Sure, why not?

### *Today, Tomorrow, and Beyond*

I've taken to calling my new girlfriend Cat Brain. Many subjects interest her. Whenever I tell her something new—informative things, mainly: the best whiskey is at least twelve years old, glow-worms glow in order to attract prey—she replies, "That's interesting." Once I was telling her about Sherman's march in Georgia, about how his soldiers dismantled the railroad and bent the rails around tree trunks. It was demoralizing for the confederates to go back to their plantations and see big iron bows tied onto the trees. She told me she thought that was interesting. I asked her, Why do you think that's interesting? She thought a minute, then said, "Because it's historical. It's a historical look at our nation." My new girl placed second in the state beauty pageant last year. This means she does not give talks at the public schools, does not ride in her own car at the homecoming parade, does not appear in television ads for literacy campaigns. Bartenders never suggest maybe she's had more to drink than a state pageant winner with a reputation to uphold should. These days my new girl is maybe drinking more than anyone should. She curls up to me in the late afternoons and becomes sullen, and for a few brief moments in my life I keep my mouth shut. She's taking it step by step, picking up the pieces, trying to look forward.

### *O Green Garden of Plants*

So I found another girl. She was young, and perfect, a rebellious and beautiful young woman who wore suede boots and clung to the wrong crowd until I wrenched her away from it. Failing first with charm, then with reason, I finally seduced her with my tremendous self-pity. She agreed to be mine, with some reservations, which she communicated to me in the form of a typed list:

No Intimate Secrets  
No Bright Ideas  
No Lessons  
No Memories  
No Impractical Arrangements  
No Gonorrhea  
No Hobbies  
No Bare Feet

As we lay in bed one night I tried to teach her something about distance. I once lived an ocean apart from you, I said.

"Is this an intimate secret or an impractical arrangement?"

It's a lesson.

She sighed. "So what are you saying?"

I mean I lived far away. In Paris, France.

"Paris. What do people do there?"

Well, I mostly hung out in a place called Le Jardin des Plantes.

"Ah, yes. French. What does that mean?"

It means, Garden of Plants.

"Hmm. Seems redundant."

Redundant? I said. Yes, I suppose it is. Say, did you know that Emerson had a revelation in the Jardin des Plantes? His first wife had just died, and...

"Oh, no you don't," she said, cutting me off with a karate chop to the pillow. "Hey. Did you know this is the Garden of Plants State? There isn't a real Garden of Plants, per se, but we've recreated a pretty good one. It's surrounded by wet glass walls. I won the Miss Garden of Plants State pageant last year. I'm the current title holder. Actually, I'm the unofficial title holder. We hold a separate contest at Claim Jumper's—an underground state pageant—when the real state pageant is going on. They give an award each year to 'The Woman Who Is Most Able To Drive Any Given Man Insane With Her Apparent Indifference to Everything He Does.' Have you heard of it?"

It seems familiar, somehow, I said. I moved my hand down her back. So have I told you I'm trying to achieve a new depth of feeling, just for you?

She looked at the ceiling and shrugged.

I asked her to tell me about the pageant.

"It's an underground thing. If you know about it, you must be pretty hip. Hey. Do you want to go?"

Where?

"To the Garden of Plants."

The next day she took me downtown to the Municipal Garden of Plants, a vast atrium crawling with African violets, hyacinths, zucchini squashes. "Be careful not to lose your way," the attendant said with a sinister chuckle. It was steamy and damp; the tang of Miracle Grow stung my sinuses. I lost my way twice. I lost the new girl. I needed a drink badly. My cheeks were twitching, my limbs trembling. I had to wrap my hands around the stalk of a rubber tree plant to keep from collapsing onto the cement. The rubber tree wiggled like a fire hose as I convulsed uncontrollably. I counted the cracks in the buckling concrete floor, trying to still myself. I let go and staggered under the dripping verdure until I came back to the attendant, who stood at the glass gate, chuckling. I punched him in the face. In the parking lot I found the new girl asleep behind the wheel of her car. I pulled her out and left her dozing on the asphalt and I got into the car and drove, I drove until I reached the dirty streets of a new place, drove until I crashed into a phone booth and knew I had reached the city. The city.

This, I believe, qualifies as something that was lost, a possession I have yet to retrieve, leaving it beyond classification, with neither genus nor species to go on.

### *Our Goals*

From time to time it's important, I think, to talk a little bit about what the purpose is here. I am Bobby Valentin. I've sunk so low I no longer enjoy the simple things—spotting a pretty girl at the record store, or going out to the bars and checking out the girls with the nice hair and the necklaces, smelling their smells, the powdered skin, the blue eyes, the legs, the...

### *Erratum*

I would like to say that, yes, I was humping the New Cat Girl when Cat Brain stormed into my apartment looking for her things. Bobby Valentin, I feel, somehow, should live up to the accusation. But I was alone, and almost asleep. "I've heard from many sources that you've been fucking every pageant winner in town!"

Cat Brain screamed at me, as she scooped clothes, both hers and mine, from the floor.

I sat up against the wall. Many sources, I said. That's interesting.

"Oh really," she said bitterly. "*Why* do you think that's interesting?"

Look, I said. This isn't entirely about pageants, is it?

"You fucker, Bobby Valentin!" she said, winding up and thumping me hard in the throat with my belt buckle, before she stole the belt, and my shoes, and a shirt. She stormed back out.

It is with a crippled voice I wish to say a few things about Bobby Valentin. I can't carry on about this man I do not know. I can only expand the search.

*We are Bobby Valentin.* It should be understood, however, that in assuming one role we do not rule out the possibility that we are somebody else.

### *Restatement of Our Goals*

But now it occurs to me that it should be made clear that this is not, after all, Bobby Valentin's Newsletter. For the sake of I should decide on a new focus. Perhaps something closer to the point. Something like

## SARAH JOHNSON'S NEWSLETTER

### *A Letter From Our New CEO*

I'm probably not the best person to ask. I haven't seen Bobby in months. I know he's living out West somewhere, but the few things I've heard about him, I've heard second-hand. He's off drugs, I think, but he's still drinking. He recently got into some trouble, too, from what I understand. I guess he was seeing Miss Something-or-other for a while; they got into a fight, he threw her down on the ground in some parking lot and broke her collarbone. I don't know whatever came of all that, whether it's settled or not. Some locals witnessed the whole thing; I heard they roughed him up pretty bad. Maybe being beaten up is the least of his worries right now. As I say, I'm not the best person to talk to. Joe Thompson hears from Bobby from time to time, he's probably got all the facts.

But if you are just looking for anything, I suppose I could start from the beginning.

Bobby and I met at a party at Joe Thompson's apartment. I knew Joe from work. I'd never really liked him, but I didn't know many people when I first moved to New York, and it felt nice to go out with a crowd sometimes, to be asked. Late that night, after the party had started to dwindle, Bobby introduced himself and asked if I wanted to do some coke. I had done it a few times, and it wasn't often that a handsome man offered to share drugs with me, so I said sure. We went into the bathroom and snorted three lines each. Bobby told me he sometimes pretended that he was inhaling powdered glass, just to freak himself out. It freaked me out.

By the time we went back to the party everyone had gone. Joe was sitting with his head thrown back over the top edge of the couch, passed out cold. He hadn't even loosened his tie. Bobby took me to his place in a taxi. We cut up the rest of his coke on a framed photograph of Grace Kelly and stayed up until ten in the morning. Bobby told me he was a Buddhist saint who had come back to earth to alleviate our suffering. I became irritated with him, but tried not to show it. I nodded at everything he said. He said, "What you need to transcend, Sarah, is this fixation on cause and effect. Things happen independently of other things, and things happen as a result of everything. These concepts are one in the same. The idea that certain causes produce certain predicted effects is the root of all suffering." He banged me hard that morning, driving the headboard into the wall so fast that the bed table vibrated; I watched as two drinking glasses crept across the table top and fell onto the floor. Objects in the room seemed to hop up and down all around us—milk crates filled with books, plants, the dresser, the dresser jumping up from the ground, a stick of deodorant, an alarm clock bouncing on top of the dresser. Everything, it seemed, was cause and effect. I thought I heard the walls singing. It went on for two hours, and I didn't come, and I bled—but still, I never wanted it to end. When finally Bobby rolled off of me, gasping, everything stopped moving, the singing hushed, everything was still and quiet and dead.

Bobby and I went for long walks throughout the city. He pointed out things I'd never have thought twice about on my own. There was the night all the homeless people in Chelsea were walking in the streets wearing homburgs. There was the bathroom in Cafe Jones, where someone had written the thirty-nine steps toward the construction of a noiseless engine across an entire wall. I sometimes imagined that Bobby created these phenomena, that he was rebuilding the city in his own image. "The trees," he told me once, during a Sunday stroll in the park, "are like women. No, one tree is not like one woman, but like many women, like all women. The large branches tremble in the wind to caress me, and from each branch extend an infinite number of smaller branches, with different movements, different touches..." I picked up a rock to throw at the back of Bobby's head, but as he moved onto different subjects—the buxom pond, the garish, succubustian sky lap dancing above us—my jealousy receded. I let the stone fall from my hand onto the path and put my arm through his.

In the spring I took Bobby to meet my family in Bronxville. He talked to our dogs, he washed the dishes, he told us he loved children and Christmas. Earlier in the week he had told me that holidays reminded him of *The Mikado*, which he hated, and that children kicked him in the shins whenever he talked to them, but I kept quiet. He told cute, happy jokes to my mother and wry, cynical jokes to my father. He was a hit. By summer I tried to get him to come up every weekend. When we stayed in the city on weekends he almost always ended up with Joe and Joe's friends. They'd go up to Amsterdam and 110th to buy drugs from some guy who dealt out of a phone booth. Some mornings Bobby got so sick I thought he was going to die. His vomit was gummy and blue, his face was grey. He sat on the couch with a wastebasket between his legs and struggled to breathe. "I can't swallow," he said. I rubbed his back and told him it was OK. And I thought about leaving the city. I swore to myself that I would quit my job and go someplace new with him, start over, if it would only get him away from this life. I wasn't disapproving. I don't know why I would disapprove, but Bobby sometimes said that anyone else

would have given him a hard time about it. I wasn't disapproving, or disappointed, or angry, only sad.

Bobby went to Europe to get away from New York. He left in winter. I was standing by the taxi in my undershirt, freezing, and I was crying. Bobby held my shoulders and said, "Everything's going to be OK, young champion. There will only be an ocean between us." When he got into the car I turned and walked back to my building, lines of tear water hardening on my face. I couldn't look back.

### *Postscript of A Young Champion*

I don't know. I've heard that prolonged drug use will sometimes cause people to lose their ability to identify and define certain situations. Reality becomes chaos to them—chronology becomes meaningless, the identities of other people become confused, or misplaced. Environments from certain phases of their lives are transposed onto others. To compensate for this loss of structure the mind creates a different order, one so complex that the minutest details are accounted for. Bobby would probably call this "Inner Evolution," the perfection of his Buddhist philosophy, but I don't know, the Buddhists I've met all seem to have some kind of a grip.

I have no idea if Bobby slept around when we were seeing each other. I do know he went to Paris in January, and stopped writing to me in February. I felt myself become older each day. When I heard he'd come back to America I didn't know what to think. I figured I'd just wait for him to call me when he wanted to. The last time I'd seen him was out on the street that winter night, the night he called me a young champion and I walked away thinking it was the saddest thing I had ever heard.

### *Tough Shit, but for Whom?*

We are receptive to all suggestions, ideas, comments, pronouncements, theories, innuendo, delusions or hoopla relevant to these pages. We do regret that we are no longer accepting anything by way of advice or criticism from one Sarah Johnson, for reasons known well enough to her and to ourselves. Sarah made her position quite clear when she tossed a potato masher hand grenade through the front window of our downtown offices one evening

last April.<sup>1</sup> The office space—along with an IBM Selectrix and a ceramic picture frame—was obliterated. We cannot condone this response; in fact, it is the opinion of this newsletter that reactions such as this one, which stray dangerously close to something like “social upheaval,” are abhorrent and disturbing. It may be the luxury of the intellectual classes to admire the principles or the underlying passion behind such revolutionary tactics, but the editors of this newsletter do not share that luxury.

I’m sure Sarah would be placated if only we printed stories about kittens.<sup>2</sup> I’ve no doubt she’d be pleased if we spun a cheerful yarn about butterflies.<sup>3</sup> But this is not our purpose. It is not even something that adheres to the accepted guidelines of a written newsletter. Our main obligation is to convey periodical reports of the status of many facets of our organization—business matters, as well as social activities designed to mitigate the stress of the work environment on our employees, like softball games, face-painting, intramural sessions of the old slap and tickle—in a dependable and punctual manner (with obvious allowances made for the time it takes to receive all the pieces back from the contributing staff, who are an unruly and incestuous bunch, always needing to collaborate on the simplest articles, always bitching about deadlines). The newsletter is designed to inform a specific sector of the work force about matters that are important to them. These are our goals.

### *A Letter From the County Lock-up*

Dear Baby,

I have lost track of the time. There is no such thing as day, as opposed to night, inside the joint. There is only permanent dimness, the shadows of the bars across my face and across the mattress, shadows that do not shift, and a light down the hall that is never turned off. Is there a guard sitting there, reading? Are there men playing cards? Perhaps I am not in jail, but in the

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<sup>1</sup>Actually, a jar of La Victoria jalapeno peppers, with the Barsamian’s price sticker still on it. And it was Bobby Valentin’s porch window—back when he was living on Jensen, which is not downtown but on the south side, near the depot.

<sup>2</sup>Rabid kittens

<sup>3</sup>Poisonous butterflies

basement of a mobster's house, being held for some fuck-up I can't remember—a crime against the mob, no doubt: I spat on Jimmy "Spats" O'Reilly's shiny new spats, while we were standing on the corner of Washington and Mass Ave; maybe I looked too intently into the eyes of Li Ping's girl at Wally's Jazz Club last night. Does the mob have its own jails? Its own Mob Justice? I have no idea why I'm in here.

I regret the loss of intimacy more than anything. Try as I might, I cannot escape the loneliness of this place. I have devised methods of alleviating the pain, of finding that release I feel when...

But perhaps this is not the time to be delicate.

I jerk off constantly, as much as I can get away with before the other inmates threaten to kill me. When I masturbate I think of you, so I suppose you could say I am thinking of you constantly, too. You hold the highest place in my thoughts right now. I hope you consider it an honor. My first hour here I masturbated three times; I thought of what you did for my penis that night I fractured my heel, when we sprawled out on the floor of Joe Thompson's closet (I even put my boots underneath my lower back, trying to recapture the moment); I imagined you dancing the way you always used to dance late at night after we'd fucked—wearing my T-shirt, naked from the waist down, your sticky blonde bush swaying like the pendulum of a clock to that Al Green record I'll probably never hear again. As I loved myself the bed-springs sang along like crickets; in the corridor the other men shouted and cheered. (The first two times; the third time they ranted and raved, and banged their metal drinking cups against the bars.) In the end it wasn't enough, I could find no release. I went for heightened simulation. I tried many things. I tore a slit in my mattress and tried to fuck it, but in the end I only hurt myself—the padding is mined with stray, uninsulated metal springs. I tried to get something on with the sink/toilet. True, it is cold, and made of tin. I was drawn to its shape more than anything. The space between the spigot and the rim of the bowl is almost tight enough for my personal needs, and by wrapping a sock around the spigot I made it perfect, really. But ultimately it was difficult to find a comfortable squat from which to start humping away. Half-standing, half-kneeling? No. Late last night,

in desperation, I bartered away my copy of Archie Digest and my last Heath Bar to the man in the adjoining cell, in exchange for a pair of nail clippers. I spent half the night digging, prying apart the craggy mortar and cement in the rear wall, chiseling and smoothing out a hole that I might be able to stick my penis into. Entry was difficult—it is fairly low-grade cement, difficult to shape into a pussy—so I took my other sock and wore it like a condom, which worked, for a while, until I tried for more penetration and ended up pushing myself off of the wall and landing on the ground, nearly breaking my ass. Exhausted, I fell into a fitful sleep, and dreamed about myself, naked, running in circles in an effort to lay hold of my own behind and bugger it soundly. The whole time I was anxious I had run out of socks. I awoke sweating and distressed, unsatisfied even in sleep.

In the morning you post bail. There are no things that need to be returned to me. I am wearing the shirt I wore when I was booked, wrinkled now, unbuttoned at the cuffs. I walk through a door into a long corridor, and I walk down the corridor and go through another door, and I am outside. It is morning, and grey, and yet to the east there are orange and deep blue strips of cloud suspended above the smokestacks. Perhaps it is smoke. In my dress shoes I walk out across the gravel lot in the chill morning alone, and I am released.

### *A Letter From Europe*

And so I tried to live in Europe, and I squandered my savings, lost twenty pounds, developed a scalp condition, got addicted to smack, kicked the smack habit, got addicted to Benzedrine, quit popping Bennies on an hourly basis, quit popping Bennies on a daily basis, wrecked the car of a woman who for a brief time thought I was decent, drank pastis at the Algerian bar, pointed my finger at the Algerians and called them all “Cunts,” ate a box of French crayons, shit in technicolor, got the shit kicked out of me, ever-darkening degrees of red pouring out of my ears, lost my voice, stopped talking, stopped writing letters to my friends, stopped writing letters to my mother, yelled at my mother when I regained my voice, although she was five-thousand miles away, yelled at Sarah Johnson or New Cat Girl or whoever it was who came to stand over me as I squatted in the Jardin des Plantes

trying to look up the ladies' dresses, I think it was Sarah, I had invited her, believing she might come...

### *A Letter From Our Old CEO*

In the evenings I sat outside a school near the Gare St. Lazare and watched the adolescent girls going home. There was a waist-high stone wall across the street, and I sat up on the edge, my back pressed against the iron bars of a fence. I froze my ass on the cold stone. The girls gathered out front in their dark capes, bags held innocently in front of their groins. It was a dark street, even by day, so that by the time school got out the girls would be nearly lost in the shadows, and I would see only a vague outline of their clothing. But it was in the dark their faces were most vivid: the pallor of their cheeks, the soft blue lines along the jaws merging into black. It was a ghost world, and each night I drifted through it, waiting for the air to get colder.

In Paris I didn't do much to attract attention. I had a balcony that looked out onto a courtyard. In the mornings I dropped chunks of white cheese down to the alley cats. Afternoons I walked through the Jardin des Plantes, reaching out to touch the bark of the trees, nodding to the panther, the ibis, the Manucode, regarding the timeless pageant and trying to retrieve, from within myself, those strange sympathies that moved Emerson to say, "I will be a naturalist." I considered that these animals were the descendants of those same animals that brought Emerson clarity in his grief. I felt joy. I perceived an affinity among things. Later, I read that all the animals in the Jardin des Plantes were eaten by the communards during the siege of 1871, while the bourgeoisie bombarded the city, and the public offices burned.

When the alley cats stopped coming around I panicked. I started drinking in the mornings. I hung out at an Algerian bar in the Twelfth, where I met some men who set me up with good dope. They called it La Copaine Blanche. There are several months I cannot remember very well. I walked endlessly. A box of crayons fell out of a young girl's book bag, and I picked it up and ate each one of them. The crayons in France are thick and chewy like tootsie rolls, and contain lead. I wandered back to the Twelfth and vomited onto the floor of the Algerian bar. They swore at me, hands grabbed hold of my shirt and tossed me stumbling

across the room. I sat up against the wall near the bathroom and pointed at each of them in turn and called them all Cunts. They beat me senseless. They smashed my head against a glass table top and left me out on the curb. Later the patron brought gauze bandages and wrapped my head. I think it's time you consider finding a new place to hang out, he told me, brushing bits of broken glass out of my hair. He led me to the end of the street and helped me sit on the curb. My scalp itched terribly. I scratched at it, the blood caking up under my fingernails. A man stopped and looked at me. He knelt and began picking through my hair like a monkey. He asked if I needed a place to stay, and I got up and began walking, I walked along the river to the Jardin des Plantes and passed out curled around a tree.

Some say the ocean is the cradle of life—our primordial womb. Others stare at the slate-blue arc of the abyss and ponder the long swim. I would admit that yes, I do think about the long swim, and sometimes I will step into the sea. The icy salt burns my feet—I've had rashes on my ankles since I was twelve. I have never gone in deep. Some people have. On the other hand I have never understood this cradle of life jazz. I did not walk out of the sea to step into this life.

And so there is a prison behind bars, where I have never been, and there is the prison of this life, where you insist I've never been. Of course I returned to Paris. I always will. Perhaps the welcome of Paris will one day wear thin, but Paris is not the point anyway, Paris has never been the point, there are other places—Asia, Africa—where I can get away from this one place, this West or North or Slum, this one place that follows me wherever I go, like the striding shadow that won't leave the corner of my eye...

In the Spring you come to see me. You find me crouched in the Jardin des Plantes scratching at the bloody bandage wrapped around my head. I do not recognize you at first, I am too busy peeking up the ladies' dresses. You reproach me. You tell me to come home. I raise my eyes. The panther coughs up ibis feathers as he paces in his cage.