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"Take Us We Bulls"
by WILL SAND

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JQ

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The Door Behind It

MICHAEL SATO

He deserves the best care possible.
But what that means depends on your perspective.

freedom and equality
since 1982

1/5/96

Mr. Matthew Bottacci:

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE'VE BEEN IN CONTACT and I wanted to remind you that your brother Galen's first annual funding review is coming up soon, at the end of next month. Believe me, I know how desks get crowded and things get put aside. If you'll recall, I included in my last letter to you—which I sent in November—a form for you to look over and sign, which indicates your support for Galen's present living situation and your willingness to see that the funding for Galen's program be renewed.

Because you are Galen's conservator, it is very important that Harbor Vocational and Residential Services be able to present this document to the board on the day of Galen's review. In case you have misplaced it, I am enclosing an additional form with this letter, along with a prepaid envelope so that all you have to do is sign it and drop it in the mail—preferably by the end of the month, as I will be on vacation from February 1 to February 15.

I hope this will not be too much trouble.

Sincerely,
Lance Cameron
Community Support Facilitator
Harbor Vocational and Residential Services.

freedom and equality
since 1982

1/11/96

Mr. Bottacci:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR LETTER. I APPRECIATE YOUR frankness. Since Friends of the Mentally Retarded was formed in 1994 it has been surprisingly aggressive in promoting its ideology, but I did not know it had taken an interest in Galen's case. I would caution you, respectfully, that Friends is a highly politicized entity whose agenda opposes any interest that works to remove the anachronistic and unnecessary barriers between mentally challenged individuals and mainstream society. The claims they make—that our programs are unsafe or mismanaged—are based entirely on rumor and anecdote, and not at all applicable to Galen's living environment.

It is true that Galen is very special to us. He is one of our most important customers, potentially crucial to the future of the program and to the lives of any number of similarly challenged individuals. This does not mean that we are using him. The Residential Support branch of HVRS was founded on the belief that there exists no reason that the natural right to learn personal responsibility, to appreciate the value of risk, and most of all, to express freedom of choice within the framework of a mainstreamed living environment should be denied anyone because he or she is mentally or physically challenged. That is to say, we believe these rights to be transcendental, inclusive, universal. Despite what Friends or any other voice may suggest, it is for this reason and no other that we decided one year ago to become the first residential support service of its kind to review the applications of those who are situated outside of the relatively small circle of so-called "high-functioning" candidates that are considered by other similar agencies. When we accepted Galen's file, Galen became the first individual in any residential support service in this state on whom no criteria whatever regarding his functionality were imposed.

We are working to obtain a speaking device that should allow Galen to express his desires more easily.

I see no basis for the charge that by this we are invoking mere abstractions in order to validate neglect or to allow consumers to, as you say, "stagnate." On the contrary, we have from the beginning been supplementing the provision of freedom vigorously with programs designed to ensure that Galen's progress in the mainstreaming process continue. To cite one concrete example, just this week our behaviorist Linda Weber observed Galen at his home and is this moment working to obtain the loan of a speaking device that, through cutting-edge technology, should allow Galen to express his desires even more easily than he is presently able. Galen's housemate, Andrew, has already agreed to take primary responsibility for whatever training is requisite to the effective use of this device.

About the matter of the backyard, I must ask once again for your understanding and patience, and trust that I am as concerned as you about the procuring of lawn maintenance equipment, or rather, our failure to do so. Please be assured that this unusual situation is an aberration, caused by a budgeting oversight that was singular and will not be repeated. I sympathize completely with your observation that the very reason we chose this house for Galen was that it has a large backyard that would serve to allow Galen to go outside at will. It is unfortunate that, over the course of the year, we have been unable to find the means to landscape the yard to make it a safe area for Galen. We are certainly continuing, in earnest, our search for the requisite funds.

Matt, please bear in mind that there are interests that would prefer that specially challenged people remain separated from society, and that the true motives of these interests are not altruistic. Galen's home is one of the most promising and exciting steps forward in the history of care provision to challenged individuals, and posterity will be grateful for our good faith and endurance.

If there is any matter which you would like to discuss in more depth, please call me at the office until seven or eight, and later than that, call me at home. And again, as much as I regret the inconvenience, I will not be available between February 1 and February 15. Had I the choice I would not take the time off now, but HVRS's mandatory vacation policy has finally, after five years, caught up with me. At this writing my fiancée, Gwen, proclaims her interest in going to Hawaii. I have not yet decided where I want to spend my two weeks of freedom, but the very utterance of the word *Hawaii* makes me certain that it is not there. Hopefully Gwen and I can reach an agreement soon. Well, you know how it is.

Thank you again for your patience and support.

Sincerely,
Lance Cameron
Community Support Facilitator
Harbor Vocational and Residential Services

compassion, vigilance

1/13/96

Mr. Matthew Bottacci,

THANK YOU FOR CONTACTING FRIENDS OF THE Mentally Retarded. Friends of the Mentally Retarded is comprised of volunteers who share the common belief that there are issues specific to mentally retarded individuals living apart from their families which are not adequately addressed by any other extant organization. As such, HVRS's rather aggressive mainstreaming program falls squarely into our field of interest. As chairperson for the Harbor-Easton chapter of Friends of the Mentally Retarded, I did know of your brother's "independent living" situation, but regrettably did not avail myself of the substance and details of his living environment prior to your inquiry. I am, frankly, ashamed to admit this since Galen's living situation seems to be quite unique, perhaps unprecedented, and therefore of considerable implication. After spending several hours researching Galen's background and observing him in his home, that I believe your concerns regarding Galen are extremely warranted and require urgent action.

I do not mean to sound hostile. Contrary to what is often believed, it is not the aim of Friends of the Mentally Retarded to raise opposition categorically to the work of HVRS and other new "mainstreaming" residential programs like it. In principle, we support HVRS's stated mission of providing its customers with opportunities to exercise freedom of choice and personal responsibility. Furthermore, I personally would never intentionally interfere with any program, whatever its ideology, that made a positive contribution to Galen's overall well-being and happiness. Neither would I question the basically good intentions of any employee of HVRS.

It must be remembered, however, that HVRS is a private interest, and therefore operates within, and is subject to many of the pressures incumbent to, the private sector. It would be irresponsible to deny the possibility that such an awkwardly situated agency might be tempted to extend an attractively phrased, if sometimes useful, ideology past the breadth of its real resources in order to widen its client base.

Friends of the Mentally Retarded holds as primary an individual's right to basic health and safety. One of our long-standing contentions with HVRS comes from their reluctance to staff homes with people who are properly trained in their field, that is, the provision of care to people with disabilities. As a case in point, Galen's live-in care giver, Andrew Lee, is still an undergraduate in college who applied for the job because he needed extra income to finish a degree in an unrelated field. Not that this in itself is to be held against him—he seems sincere in his concern for Galen—still, he himself admits to having, prior to this job, almost no contact with any developmentally disabled or otherwise handicapped person, and no working experience at all in the field of care provision. HVRS claims it is part of the "mainstreaming" process to deliberately hire staff who have had no experience with, and thus have "no prejudices" toward those with disabilities. We think this is a provocative and precarious position, and it is surely unreasonable to argue that there is no connection between it and the fact that

since Galen moved into his home one year ago, he has been taken to the emergency room, by ambulance, no less than five times: once, when he stopped breathing during a seizure; two times for choking on non-comestible objects (a peach pit, a plastic fork); and two times for injuries suffered from falling. Both of the latter injuries were to the face and head, and probably would not have occurred had Galen been wearing his helmet. When I queried Galen's community support facilitator, Lance Cameron, as to why Galen did not wear his helmet, Mr. Cameron answered to the effect that the helmet had been discarded because it is "socially stigmatizing" and therefore obstructs the process of "mainstreaming" Galen into his community.

In the five years Galen spent at the state facility in Easton, Galen required hospitalization only one time.

HVRS responds to this alarming statistic by propounding the "value of risk," an idea wherein there is always inherent in freedom a certain amount of danger, but that this danger is outweighed by the larger benefits derived from personal independence. We have very serious doubts about the plausibility of this line; for us the right to basic physical safety is paramount and ought not be compromised by abstractions which, however noble sounding, may amount to something less in fact and deed.

When I visited Galen's home I asked Andrew about the nature of the choices that Galen was making and how he was using his freedom to choose and realize his desires. Andrew's response to me was so circuitous and vague I had to suppose he did not understand my question. I therefore asked Andrew if he could demonstrate for me what he *does* by way of supporting Galen's desires. Andrew proceeded to proffer to Galen a number of verbal prompts regarding daily-life choices (Would you like to listen to music? Would you like spaghetti for dinner?), to which Galen seemed to be completely uninterested, if not uncomprehending. When I asked Andrew if I had caught Galen on a bad day, Andrew answered flatly that he did not expect Galen to respond to any of his prompts, and that in fact Galen has in the past year never once responded, verbally or otherwise, to any of the prompts that Andrew has on a daily basis given to him. Further inquiry was to reveal to me that so far as Andrew knew, Galen has not uttered a single intelligible word since moving into the home.

I was so surprised to learn this, especially since you told me that as a child Galen could produce short sentences, that I consulted Galen's former doctor at the state facility. Evidently Galen's file does show that when in school he possessed a vocabulary of some two hundred words, but that by the time he left the state home he had already been growing increasingly silent for the previous several years. The doctor believes that since finishing school it is likely that Galen has forgotten the words he then knew, or the mental effort required to produce utterances has increased so much as to be prohibitive. In the doctor's view, it is very unlikely that without a regimented and sustained program of education Galen would again be able to mark gains in this area of his functionality.

Galen's daily activity consists largely of spending hours gazing at the backyard through the dining room window.

I think, Mr. Bottacci, that Galen's silence combined with the danger connate to his environment raise a near conclusive argument against the efficacy, if not the basic humanity, of HVRS's mainstreaming program. That said, I must include a note about Galen's backyard, if only because the backyard was to me the most disturbing feature of Galen's home. Galen's preoccupation with his backyard is very intense, and this preoccupation is the only exception I saw to his otherwise complete passivity and disinterest in his surroundings.

Ironically enough, it is finally with the backyard that HVRS takes up the issue of safety. Not that I would contest; the yard is a veritable wilderness by now. According to Andrew, the backyard has not been so much as mowed since the day they moved into the home. There are numerous large objects, mostly junk, strewn amongst the weeds, and in the center of the yard a large hole, perhaps four by four feet, half-filled with mud, that the previous tenants for some reason dug but failed to fill up again.

According to Andrew, Galen's daily activity consists largely of spending hours gazing at this backyard through the dining room window, and this is in fact what he did through most of my visit. He knows where the back door is, and frequently goes there to try to open it. Regrettably, the back door remains locked, and therefore the one thing that Galen shows an active interest in, he is forbade. When I queried Mr. Cameron about this situation, he told me that under the conditions of the lease HVRS accepted the responsibility to landscape the yard to meet its safety standards. There had been an oversight in budgeting, and was therefore no means at all either to rent or purchase yard maintenance equipment or to hire a professional landscaping service. Mr. Cameron was glib, but I'm afraid I don't find the oversight as excusable as he.

I hope this letter proves to be of use to you. In my view, that the safety standards of Galen's independent living arrangement are lower than those at the state facility in Easton seems likely; however, that Galen has benefited

commensurately from his "freedom" is, at best, doubtful. Unless matters change by February's end, my recommendation to you will have to be that you seriously consider allowing Galen to return to his home in Easton, where he can be cared for by trained and experienced personnel, and the yard is always well kept.

Thank you again, Mr. Bottacci, for contacting Friends of the Mentally Retarded.

Sincerely,
Ann Pearson
Chairperson, Friends of the Mentally Retarded

Sent: Jan 20 1996 2:10 PM
From: Andrewl@aol.com
Re: Galen

HEY MATT, IT'S DRE. SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG TO GET back to you. I got a bitch of a term paper to write that's already late, and if I don't pull a B or better I have to take the whole class over again. Not a nice thought for someone whose already been in college for *five fucking years*. And it doesn't help when your boss is having anxiety conniptions. The backyard, the woman from that mentally retarded group—and he was already cracking up over this vacation of his. A couple days ago he came in here with a pile of brochures from the travel agency and made me look at them because he can't make up his own mind where he wants to go. "I know there's somewhere," he says, "but I just can't think of the name of the place."

"How about France?"

"No, no. Not France."

"Why don't you go to Mexico?"

"Where I want to go," he says, getting all heated again, "is the one place in the world where no one will say to me, 'Why don't you go to Mexico?'"

"Then Mexico it is."

"Why don't you go to Mexico? Why don't you go to Spain? Why don't you go to *China*, for God's sake? This is my first vacation, my first freedom, in five long years, and I want to go where *I* want to go. If everyone would just give me a little bit of space to figure it out."

All the brochures looked the same to me, too. Beaches, pretty buildings, some white people kissing. I wouldn't be going to any of those places either, but on the other hand, how do you know a place before you see the brochure? It's like the pictures on Galen's new speaking machine—that's what you asked about, right? Lance calls it a "want-board." It looks like the latest contraption from NASA, but actually it's not that big a deal, nothing more than a kind of tape recorder in the shape of a big board with some blank squares on it. What you do is put your own pictures of things into the squares, and then record a different sentence into the machine for each of the different pictures. Then, if you put your finger on a picture of a Coke, say, a recording inside the board says something like, "I'd like a Coke."

Lance said we should keep it simple at first, so for now, there's only two pictures on the board, one of a Coke and one of a 7-Up. "With this machine," he says, "Galen will be able to talk." I'm supposed to try fifteen times a day to get Galen to learn how to use the thing. So far, after three days and forty-five tries, he doesn't get it. I'll tell you the truth, Matt: I dislike the board. Galen's never going to be able to use the thing—not in three more days or three more years. They brought in the board because they think the reason Galen doesn't say what he wants is because physically he can't speak. They're wrong. Galen's got a tongue and a throat and a voice just like anyone else. What Galen doesn't have, that a guy needs to speak, is words. The board's not going to make any difference for Galen, because if you've got no words—words in your head—then how can you have pictures? To Galen a picture of a Coke means exactly what the word "Coke" means: nothing. And you can't want anything without a picture of it; a want *is* a picture. Without pictures you can't want anything at all except, maybe, for what's already there.

I gotta go.

freedom and equality
since 1982

1/24/96

Mr. Bottacci:

THANK YOU FOR KEEPING ME APPRISED.

According to my understanding of the conclusions you reached from the recommendations of Ms. Pearson, you will not be supporting the renewal of funding at the end February unless the following conditions are before that time met:

1) Galen demonstrate, unambiguously, both the willingness and ability to express his will in some matter affecting the course of his daily life.
2) The issue of the backyard be resolved.

I would like to urge you, Matt, *not* to stand by these conditions. It may be *very difficult* to meet these conditions by the end of February.

Let me remind you that if Galen's funding is not renewed, he will in all likelihood be transferred back to the state facility in Easton. Please take a moment to remember the quality of life at the state facility that compelled you a year ago to seek an alternative for Galen. The lives of the residents of such facilities, however

secure, are so thoroughly regimented in every aspect, so inexorably regulated and colorless, the residents themselves having virtually no opportunity to realize or even express their own individually conceived desires, that the lives become nothing more than imposed routines, lives without *change*, without *plot*—without the things that distinguish the lives of humans. Residents in the state-run facilities have no choice at all in matters such as when and what they will eat, where at the dinner table they will sit, when the meal is over, when they will go to bed, when they will wake up, when they will shower, when they will watch TV, what they will watch, or what they will wear. And it is hardly a secret that, in spite of its illegality, residents of these facilities are physically forced to comply to this regime. Residents therefore have no freedom at all, eventually, even in their own minds. The system in which they participate is therefore completely dehumanizing, and for a resident of this system there is *no way out*.

Remember, Matt, that Galen lived in the state facility for five years. That's five years of what amounts to a kind of incarceration. It is to be expected that it would take anyone—even someone who was not challenged in any other way—some time to adjust to a life in which he or she was free and allowed to make choices. I believe that there is inside of everyone a desire to make choices, and that it is this desire more than anything else that makes life a fulfilling and meaningful experience. If you believe this too, then I implore you to relax your conditions, and give your brother Galen a little more time and one more chance.

Very sincerely,
Lance Cameron
Community Support Facilitator
Harbor Vocational and Residential Services

P.S. I checked Galen's file. Ms. Pearson is correct. During Galen's stay at the state facility, he was taken to the emergency room only once. It seems one of the staff at the Easton facility broke two of Galen's fingers with a broomstick on a morning that Galen was slow to wake up for breakfast.

1/24/96

Mr. Matthew Bottacci:

I AM WRITING TO YOU IN REGARD TO YOUR BROTHER Galen Bottacci, at the request of the Community Support Facilitator at Harbor Vocational and Residential Services, Lance Cameron. My name is Linda Weber. I am a behavioral psychologist and I specialize in communication enhancement strategies for physically and mentally challenged individuals. After observing Galen, I was able to conclude within an acceptable level of probability that Galen does not communicate verbally to any recognizable effect. I therefore recommended that Galen's current program be supplemented with a Level One Portable Speaking Device. The device successfully enhances the communicative competence of about eighty-three percent of those to whom the devise is prescribed. There appears to be, however, a correlation between the length of time required to succeed in operating the device and the operator's measured level of intelligence. Mr. Cameron asked me to emphasize this point especially.

One of the staff broke two of Galen's fingers with a broomstick on a morning that Galen was slow to wake up for breakfast.

Sincerely,
Linda Weber

Sent: Jan 24 1996 10:46 PM
From: Andrewl@aol.com
To: Matthew Bottacci

I CAN'T DO THAT WANT-BOARD WITH GALEN anymore. I told Lance today. Damn, he was pissed.

Dre

freedom and equality
since 1982

1/29/96

Mr. Bottacci,

I'M SORRY THAT I COULD NOT CONVINCE YOU TO withdraw the conditions you set regarding Galen's home and his upcoming funding review. I know that what we all want is what's best for Galen, and that sometimes these decisions are difficult to make. Lance has been with us for five years and he is one of the most dedicated and able community support facilitators at HVRS. He will do everything he can in what time remains to see that your conditions are met.

In the meanwhile, I am enclosing the documents requisite to beginning the smooth and timely transfer of

Galen's sponsorship from HVRS to the Easton state facility. I'm happy to respond to any questions you might have regarding these forms.

Sincerely,
Barbara Elfman
President
Harbor Vocational and Residential Services

Sent: Feb 5 1996 3:35 PM
From: Andrewl@aol.com
Re: Galen

HEY MATT, IT'S DRE AGAIN. THERE ARE THREE THINGS that I have to tell you. One, I was wrong about Galen and the want-board. Two, I got a C on my paper. Three, I've had it with college and this job, and I need to move on. The whole situation here gives me the jeebs.

Hold on. Someone at the door.

freedom and equality
since 1982

2/2/96

Mr. Bottacci,

I'M HAPPY TO INFORM YOU THAT THE MATTER OF THE backyard has been resolved, and also that Galen has begun to express his desires in a clear and unequivocal manner. As you requested, I have already contacted Ms. Pearson, and she will be visiting your brother's home this afternoon in order to observe him. She will be in touch with you shortly.

Yours,
Lance Cameron
Community Support Facilitator
Harbor Vocational and Residential Services.

Sent: Feb 2 1996 7:13 PM
From: Andrewl@aol.com
Re: Galen

SORRY THERE. THAT WAS THE LADY FROM THE mentally retarded group that came over a while back. She wanted to see Galen do the want-board. No problem. He does it, and he does it all by himself. Think that's great? Don't thank me. After I told Lance I didn't want any part of the want-board we argued like dogs, but then instead of firing me he just took up the slack himself. Spent a lot of time—most of the past week—here with Galen and the want-board, trying to get Galen to learn the thing before vacation (even though he *still* didn't know where he wanted to go) because after vacation, he said, it would be too late. Let me tell you, that man has patience. He tried everything you can think of. He *begged* Galen to pay attention. But Galen never did anything but stare out the back window at that old backyard.

At the end of it I didn't know who I felt more sorry for, Galen or Lance. I came in that last day to find them sitting together in the darkening living room, quiet and gazing out the back window, the want-board abandoned on the table. All that time wasted, I thought. A real shame.

"Hey man, did your best," I said, because I hated seeing the two of them sit there that way.

"Andrew, do you still have the key to the back door?" Lance said.

"Yes."

"Go and get it."

I didn't like the sound of it, but I did what he said. It took me a few minutes to find it; it's never been used. When I came back out into the living room Lance pointed me over to the door. He said, "When I count to three, unlock it."

He counted to three. I swear Galen must have been counting along, because the instant I put that key in the lock and lock went 'click' he popped from his chair and sped right across the room as fast as I have ever seen him run, grinning and laughing and waving his arms all over. But Lance popped up from his chair too, and he moved just a little bit faster. He slipped himself right between Galen and the little hallway in front of the door, and stuck that black board up under Galen's face.

I said, "That's not so cool."

"Just leave the door open until I tell you to close it." Lance nudged the board against Galen's chest, and Galen looked down at it, surprised, as if after all this time he'd never seen the thing before. Lance made a gesture toward the two big pictures of the Coke and the 7-Up, then lifted the machine, pretending to allow Galen to go through, then right away put the board back in front of him again. Galen looked over Lance's shoulder, at the open door, and then he looked hard at the machine for a long time, maybe two or three minutes. His whole face creased up with hard thought, struggling, painful thought, and then—I couldn't believe it—he lifted his hand to the board, and he pressed a button. The machine said, "I'd like a Coke." Lance put the can of soda to Galen's lips—not for long though, just long enough for Galen to get a taste—and then he pulled the can away. Then, Lance took one step back toward the door, so that Galen could move one step closer to the outside. When Galen figured out he couldn't go any farther, he put his hand to the board and pressed the

button again. The board said, "I'd like a Coke," and Lance gave Galen another sip, just enough to get the taste, and took one more step back. Galen stepped forward, and pressed the button again, "I'd like a Coke," and Lance gave him another sip.

Lance said, "Close the door." And so I did.

Galen pressed the button again. "I'd like a Coke." And Lance gave him another sip.

We tricked your brother into wanting Coke.

vigilance, compassion

2/3/96

Mr Matthew Bottacci:

YESTERDAY I VISITED GALEN'S HOME IN ORDER TO verify claims made by Mr. Cameron regarding improvements made to Galen's living conditions. I will say at the outset that I was very surprised, and impressed, by the appearance of the backyard. The hole was filled up, the ground cleared of hazardous objects, the weeds and brush mowed down. In the driveway was a pickup truck filled with rolls of sod, and Mr. Cameron was himself spreading one of them across an edge of the yard. While he did not say so, I was to learn from Andrew that the material and equipment had all been purchased by Mr. Cameron with his own means, and that Mr. Cameron was single-handedly landscaping the yard with donated vacation time. The work is not yet finished, but I expect the yard will be quite safe for Galen within several days.

At the time of my visit Galen was using his speaking device with some enthusiasm. There were six pictures on the board, all representations of drink or food items. Evidently Galen uses the board so continuously that he has gained weight, and he did seem healthy compared to how he looked the last time I visited. He has even, it seemed, forgotten about the backyard. It may be that with its appearance so changed, the backyard no longer holds whatever meaning it held for him previously.

Now, unlike before, Galen is able to acquire some of the things he wants. Should Galen continue to use the board, we should hope that Galen's staff over time increase the number of pictures so that Galen can enjoy an increasingly widening range of choices.

In light of these changes, I am no longer able to advise you to remove Galen from his current home. Galen will need a new live-in, of course, by the end of the month, since Andrew has resigned. I don't suppose HVRS will have a problem finding someone.

Sincerely,
Ann Pearson
Chairperson, Friends of the Mentally Retarded

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Sent: Feb 5 1996 6:42 AM
To: Matthew Bottacci
From: Andrewl@aol.com
Re: outahere
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JUST WANTED TO SAY BYE. COLLEGE WAS A MISTAKE, cost me five long years and a pile of money—I'll be in debt till I'm forty. But now it's behind me, and fit to be forgotten. I guess you heard about the backyard. It's finished now, and Lance has been trying to get Galen to go outside and enjoy the sun and breeze. Galen won't have anything to do with it. His world is that want-board, now. There's nothing else.

People ask me what I want to do next, when I leave here. I know there's something. But everything, when I say it, sounds wrong.

Dre

MICHAEL SATO

Lives in a factory town in Japan, where he teaches English, dabbles in translation, and waits for the dollar to weaken so that he can change his money and return to the U.S.

The Law Enforcer of Eagle Town

RICHARD BEHRENS

Standing up for what's right is never without risks.

i

burnt angels, soaring home

THAT DAY THE SUN WAS HIDING BEHIND THE CLOUDS like a wounded child, but it took me more than a few seconds to adjust my eyes to the dark interior of the store. First the flour sacks came into focus, then the glass candy cases, the shelves of baked beans in their silvery cans, the saddle bags, the harnesses and the flatboards against the far wall. He was sitting with two Papal agents, his cane chair creaking against the flatboards under all that weight. What I remember was a small card table between them, some papers laid out so they could all read whatever was printed. Then there was a bird, a small blue-beaked thing with thin wings and sad eyes, his stick-like foot chained to the table with a tiny lock. The creature would struggle, flap madly into the air, turning into a propeller swirl of feathers and squawks, then flop back down onto the card table, defeated, abandon freedom for a passing moment, then renew its frenzy with another mad flapping of wings. It flew up, clopped down, over and over.

I was twelve and was coming in from the station wagon with my father and sister that first time and he took us by surprise, otherwise we wouldn't have gone into the store that afternoon. His three hundred pounds fell in bags down the side of his seat, the cushion under him obliterated. His thin white shirt was folded under him; large pools of sweat were about his arms and gut, streamers of it coming down from under the yellow straw hat into the folds of his warty neck. His bug eyes turned toward my father, scanning his prey before the attack.

My father's hand went limp and cold as he held me about the neck, then withdrew and fell to his side, now powerless and obsolete. His hand remembered as well as he did that Shingle had invisible eyes that crept out into the night, over the onion fields and locust groves, probing into the bedroom windows and basement workshops. My father, who in his day had been a backyard wrestler, was a small mite in the presence of the law enforcer.

"Even'n, Yardley." The bug eyes were now locked, hypnotizing, suddenly darker around the rims as if a mist of evil had just descended over Shingle. His voice was laconic and level, emotionless without a hint of intention.

"Officer Shingle," my father said, the crack in his voice betraying fear. "I just came to get some paint for the cottage."

"I didn't ask what you were here for, Yardley. I just "Just one minute, Yardley." His damned bug eyes cut across the room to my father standing by the oak counter. "I got a couple of questions for you, you mind this time of afternoon?'

"No, sir."

"Then pull up a handful of those nuts and let's have a conversation, you and me." He gestured toward the cane seat next to him. Hesitantly, my father took a bag of walnuts from Whinstanley's counter and slid over to the cane seat, sitting down with the slow measure of a man getting into his final electric chair. Shingle grinned and slapped my father's thigh. My father shuddered and then slumped, his head bowed more out of fright than respect, and his hands cupped before his belly.

It took three men—the two Papal agents and Whinstanley—to move Shingle out of the cane seat he was stuck in.

Shingle let loose his word horde: "We got some trouble over in Harvestville again with a couple of Clays. You know them, no? Well, I was checking up in these here county courthouse records and it seems you bought some land off one of them. Not one of them but a Eustace Gamble who married a Clay a few months before you came to him with those bank notes, remember? Good, its good to see your memory improving, Yardley. So this Gamble went and spilled some of his liquor into the river trying to keep the snarks from getting it and by accident he took a tumble and cracked his skull on a log, rushed to a hospital, and made some weird death bed confession about a railroad in some of the basements around here. You know anything you ain't letting on, Yard?"

"Mr. Shingle, if I had a story line to tell I'd tell it right quick, you know that."

"Yeah, I know. We go back a ways, back to when you boxed in the Sand League and I was going to be your manager. But times change. I aim to keep to the letter of the law around here, and these folks from Cedar Crest Division want me to check out some of the basements around here. I suppose I can start with yours, now right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know a man named Brown?"

My father's silence betrayed his fear. It was as if a bullet had struck him in the knee and he was damned if he was going to let on about it. His eyes closed tight as if the lowering of the lids would help avoid detection.

"No need to answer," Shingle sighed. "I know you're scared of that man. He beat you in mud wrestling back in the Plains and when you whipped him back he swore to cut your throat and feed your apple to the hounds. Well, don't worry, we got him up at the Point and he's behind five rows of steel wasting away and he'll never come out to beat you or anybody. Caught him sneaking across the line with a trunk full of clowns from the coast. Oh, he talked all right—talked about what you and him were doing in the Plain and how you got that chain saw motor, remember?"

"Yes, sir." My father spoke from behind those trembling eyelids.

"So, let's take a look at that basement and we'll spin out to the Point to identify some faces. Sorry to ruin your little afternoon painting the cottage, but Yard, we got to get to the letter of the law. Stuff ain't right if the letter's tampered with, now."

"Yes, sir. I deserve it, sir."

"That's what I'd like to hear. There's strength in that, Yard. You know there is."

It took three men—the two Papal agents and Whinstanley—to move Shingle out of the cane seat he was stuck in. As he puffed and heaved, I paid mind to my sister who was terrified, her little knees shaking, her eyes tearing like someone had just died. I put my arms around her and she backed off, not wanting to be touched.

We all piled into Shingle's rambling brown sedan, the man stuffing himself behind the wheel with a fluid plop, and were soon cutting down the mill roads past the pump stations and the irrigation ditches, across the deserted lot behind our neighborhood, and the thin dirt path we had taken just an hour earlier to get to the store in the first place. Then, we emptied out in the front of the wooden screened porch where Mother sat in a large wicker chair. When she saw us emerge from the Shingle car, along with the fat man himself and two city folk she couldn't identify, she got up, her gingham dress falling shapeless about her, and withdrew into the house, slamming the door tight.

The car almost overturned with getting the Enforcer out and this time even my father helped, ironic since he was the one who was just about to lose everything to this man. I couldn't watch.

"Your woman got a nice welcome for folks," Shingle growled. "So open the hatch and let's have a look see."

The city folk went to the metal door over the stairs down and started to fumble with the lock. Mother came out like a raging fury and threw herself against the red rusted bar with her solid foot. "No," she said. "You open that door, my life is killed forever."

Shingle wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his fat hand. "Look, Lois, you ain't got a pot to piss in here. You think because you tell me to go away, I'm going to go away and forget it? It's over already. Just accept that, is all."

"I have children," she said.

"Yeah, and they're going to be just fine. But we got Yardley here who broke the letter of the law. We don't tolerate the breaking of the letter. It says even in the scriptures to change not a letter one jot, or something like that, is all. See, I'm the Enforcer and I have to come when a rule's been bent or something's been spelled out wrong."

"You're just an evil man!" she hissed. "With rotting meat in your belly and a head full of fat lies!"

Shingle lowered his lids for a pause with a sort of lost boy sadness, then came up again with an angry fist that hit my mother across the mouth. She fell to the side like a collapsing house of cards. "Open it," he said to the city folk while Mother pounded the ground with the force of impotent rage.

The city folk cracked the bar with some special instrument they kept hidden behind their bodies, but it came apart as if it were tissue paper, the bar falling to the side and clattering on the path. They went down into the hole and there was a tense moment while flickering light danced against the sides of the descent.

"What you got?" Shingle said, lifting a large leg onto the concrete step leading to the stairs.

"Yep, A.J." came a nasal voice. "We got a stash."

My father heard the voices from down in his workshop and leaned against the picket post, faint and pale, beads of sweat dripping onto his flannel collar. "Jesus in Heaven," he said. "Lois, this is the end."

The snarks removed fourteen clown suits from the basement and six boxes of orange pom-poms, all of which were faded and obviously well worn. Some of the polka dotted pants were grease stained and worn through with many holes, patched together sloppy and veined with stitching from various rips and tears. Shingle cornered my father against the slats of the house and held a pom-pom to his nose like he was trying to stuff it.

"You know where the shit inside these clothes went?"

"I ain't saying," my father said, summoning a bit of courage that had been absent for the past hour of his ordeal.

"You got a railroad, Yard boy. You don't have no bargaining power is how I see it. Now I want this thing: why you keep the threads after the shits were gone? You walking around the house in your Bozo nose? You want to be a shit clown chromo just like them?"

My father maintained a stoic silence.

"How many you running for? You paint their faces and fix them up in dungarees? You can't do that around here, Mister! You know that from back in the Point! I just don't believe you'd be so stupid to let all this stuff get moldy

down there, guy. The real slick operators burn the stuff in trash cans and bury the ashes deep in Rahoon and the Winneskeag. Tell me, Yardley, how many you running for?"

"I didn't have no railroad, Shingle."

"You like to dress up then? You put these buttons on and make your little kids laugh?"

My sister who was crying and pulling at her red ponytails, now spat out, "Leave daddy alone!"

The fat man turned his predatory eyes toward the freckled girl who receded from him as if she were staring into the face of an evil spirit that arose from the darkness of her bathroom mirror. The muscles of her face, already tense, withdrew into a rictus of terror.

To my dying day, I will not forgive that fat shit for doing that to her. He didn't have to. He could have ignored her and gone about his damned business with my father. But he turned to her and forged into her mind some image that will make her not well for the rest of her life—an act that could have been avoided so easily. But he did it just to spite, just to spread a bit of his evil about, because he was the man with the badge, sanctioned by the state, capable of anything including murder, a man who has beaten children until they bled, who has broken up more families than death itself. He turned to her with red furious anger in his demon-haunted face and said with a snarl:

"Your daddy, little girl, is about to get the Point!"

And that's all I have to say about that day. The rest I don't care to remember.

ii

on this parched earth, in flesh

THE MONTH AFTER MY FATHER WAS TAKEN, WE HAD a locust sweep over the fields and most of the farmers were out with their guns firing the poison pellets into the air and running in relays back to the gas pumps. Old Man Snaggle had a rusty old flamethrower he used over the empty lots and got many of them single-handedly, but at the last moment his fuel pump backfired and he got a face full of fire. His hair was burned right off and his eyebrows melted till he looked like a shaven cancerous egg. He sat in his bed and stared at the walls until he died from fever two weeks later. Old Man Snaggle is considered a bit of hero around here because of how he went out and gave his life to fight the locusts.

The crops were tainted with residue and the farmers got scared. The next winter a fever killed most of the animals and we were trying to make do but there was no manure left in reserve. Collections were taken up to order the pesticides through a mail-order catalog.

And we, the Yardleys, just gave up. Father was gone. Our land went to rot, our shed collapsed, we sold our cows in town. There was nothing left for us.

iii

in the basements, buried dreams

LIKE FOOLS RUSHING MADLY IN PARADISE, WE TOOK in one more clown, a dirty little fellow who showed up one night in a rainstorm breathing asthmatically and coughing blood from his thick red lips. We carried him half-dead and bleeding to the upstairs guest room and laid him out on the floor over a large tarp that stained quickly with his drippings. In his dirty white glove we found a card with our father's code name on it. This was how the Chromo found us, a tiny strip of paper thrust into his spastic hand by some sympathetic ear with a frightened but kind heart who decided to take the mentally deranged creature, so pitiful and loveless, and drop into his fingers a tiny bit of hope. The Chromo had followed, God knows how, and was now safe in our house.

Mom was cautious. "I think he has a fever and something broke up in there. Look, the blood has these white flakes in it like his throat was coming apart in bits."

"Your daddy was a clown lover!" he screamed, spewing tracers of spittle. "A clown lover and he liked to put his thing in a jar of bugs!"

The clown gasped and opened his dropping eyes. "You folks don't need no Klappo to worry about. Just put him outside in the dog pit and let him go to sleep."

"Nonsense," Mom said maternally, wiping more blood from around his mouth. "We ain't going to let some living thing die like this. And if you have to go it's going to be in a decent folks' home, not in a pile of dung in the road."

"But zooks, if you ain't kind to Klappo!"

He stayed with us a few days, shivering on a straw pallet in the basement, until the bleeding stopped and his eyesight was restored; then we sent him on his way. We stood at the edge of the wood and watched his slow haunted form slink into the mysterious depths of the trees. In his pantaloons he had a series of coded instructions to the next safe house in Plainsfield. This time, we were careful to fully burn the clothes to ash and then to scatter the ashes in a nearby cornfield. I accomplished this by filling my pockets with the soot and then strolling through the weeds with streamers pouring down my leg from a carefully placed hole in one pocket.

Just as I was heading home, I found Jack Webster, the retarded son of an iron worker, rummaging through some garbage by the landfill. Under the gray sky he looked sick, his slack mouth was thick with drool. His eyes buzzed around a bit but he found me walking through the weeds, my hands pushed hard into my pockets.

"Your daddy was a clown lover!" he screamed, spewing tracers of spittle. "A clown lover and he liked to put his thing in a jar of bugs!"

I caught fire, angry at the misfortune my father's operation had suffered: losing his partners, having his home invaded and being thrown into a Papal jail, his family humiliated. Years later, when I was traveling up north near the Point, working on my history books, I worked hard to convince myself that my father was good, and although he broke the laws he was justified in the eyes of the Lord for what he did. But back in those Eagle Town days, I knew only red anger at having suffered. I wanted my father home again, sitting by the fire and talking with Judge Leaton or the anarchist Frencke, fixing trap doors in the basement and painting the wooden shingles on the roof of the cottage. Thinking all these scenes and how distant they were, I stood on the edge of that mountainous landfill, facing that drooling idiot son of Kent Webster and felt blood-red anger.

I pulled my fists out of my pockets, noticing in the chaos of the moment that the knuckles were stained deep in the ash, and dove for his sweaty white neck. I remember a creepy face, pushing its squat nose toward me, mucous dripping onto the upper lip, and those cracked teeth yellow stained gnashing up and down. What I can't remember is the knife wheeling up in an arc and catching me in the left nostril, ripping out a piece of nose. I pushed my palms into my spurting wound and held them there, listening to my own screams.

"Stop saying those filthy things!" I cried. "I'm a good boy raised by a good daddy. Take those things back!"

In my mind, I pummeled Jack Webster several times in the stomach with one fist, knocking him flat. He fell unconscious and spitting blood from lips. His skin was pale white, the lips darkening to a thick red and the nose glowing with that hideous malformation of the Chromos in the basement. But, of course, I never laid a finger on the retard, it was all a fantasy caused by the stinging pain being driven straight into my skull. For a moment, before I lost it all, I saw a grinning clown skull with a party hat and tasted the grimy texture of leather in my mouth, the sides of my face smothered in the cascading folds of fat slithering down the edges of a bar stool.

"Ha!" Billy shouted. "Now you got a red nose! Just like them!" and his leather boots fled across the crunching landfill and rotting dog bones. He danced at a distance, a dark shadow against the fading light, then came back laughing. He took out these three little bamboo shoots that were tied together and started pressing it to his lips, coming out with these strangely musical passages that spoke of something beyond reason. It actually lulled me, despite my pain.

I lay on the garbage heap, a piece of my nose flapping to the side like the door to some forgotten basement that wouldn't shut. Billy Webster stood by all that time playing dreamily on that crazy wooden flute, piping to the mountains of garbage. When I realized the full force of what had happened to me, I asked him politely, "Don't your daddy want you home or something?"

"No, he's all right alone. Ever since Mom died he just sits there, goes to work, comes home, sits there. He ain't no clown lover like your daddy!"

He held up the blade, stained a dull red with my blood. "I got to cut you one if you touch me. I already cut your nose something gruesome. Now you're red, like them."

"All right," I said, lifting my weakened head to the air above. "You win this round. What do you know about my daddy?"

The retard smiled and jumped up and down, his knife and flute clutched in the same tight fist. "He had those clown women and he went to them like Mom and Daddy used to do after taking dickweed!"

"Where, when? What are you talking about?"

"That guy who used to pick his head, what was it? The guy, the one who, he came down with those trucks and gave your daddy a hard rap about—the guy who used to make those movies with the clowns—what's his name?"

"I'm tired of this. I'm going home to stanch my nose."

I got only a few yards before he called out to me, a thick slobbering voice lost in its wetness and knotted tongue. "I seen them, those clown bitches sucking on the roots, getting all light headed."

He fell to his knees and scrawled ciphers in the dirt, little squiggles and worms, trying to explain something, some design from out of the recesses of his damaged mind. Spittle fell from his lips onto his sketches, obliterating some of the details, but his wet dirt encrusted fingers would retrace the lines exactly as they had been, obsessive and definite.

"Say Jack," I said loud over the garbage piles. "What you doing?"

He giggled, kicked the dirt out with his heels, wiping out all traces of his work, and then skipped down the path toward the cyclone fencing, wrapping around the landfill mountain and disappearing into the brambles and cedar trees of Old Mill Road.

I put a soothing palm to my wounded nose, placing the flap back as carefully as pulling up my pants in public. Off in the distance, the low moans of the foghorn blasted from the factory gates, the evening signal for the workers.

My mind was on fire with thoughts about my father: what exactly had he been involved with? Who were the men in blue suits who came to take away the sick and dying clowns from the basement? Who were those men that Shingle had talked about and why had my father been so terrified by the name Brown?

The back of my skull knew the answers, saw faces and smelled liquor on the breath of strangers peering through holes in wooden planks. When I was just an infant, there were comings and goings, men in blue, well-tailored folk with just a hint of red lipstick and white puffs around the eyes, straw hair dyed a deep purple but carefully combed and tucked under wide-brimmed hats. They carried suitcases which were never opened, and smoked a thick root that I haven't seen since childhood. Father seemed afraid of them, but he never failed to look them in the eyes. These men were not friendly, but they were in alliance.

That night there was a meteor shower and my mother nursed my nose on the porch so we could watch the tracers of light cutting lines through the sky. Sarah was fixing her little tails and she poked a finger at the stars over and over saying, "I wanna go there… and I wanna go there… and there… and there… and I wanna go there."

There was a deep sadness on that porch, three lonely people in wicker chairs staring at the dome of the sky. It had been made very clear, all too clear, that we would not get to see daddy again until his release, a date that was never revealed to us but promised ("within a reasonable time for such an offense," was the official wording that came in the mail). But even if that reasonable time ever came and my father's body came walking, somehow, up that garden path, it really wouldn't be father anymore. There would be no more father inside those hollow eyes. The Point was known to do that to a man, remove him from himself until there was nothing left.

We were now alone with our memories and unanswered questions.

iv

across the troubled worlds

SIX YEARS LATER, I SAW A.J. SHINGLE AGAIN. HE HAD just unleashed a wave of terror against Eagle Town, the worst since the wars, spreading his thick but long fingers throughout the townships, along the dirt roads, into the basements, along the cellar pits, down the chimneys, into people's private spaces and minds, through the hatches, and blowing lids off with the fury of tornadoes. The man rolled down Highway 31 in his convertible, stuffed behind the wheel with a huge cigar stuck in his flabby face. The tip glowed red and announced his coming like a homing beacon crying to the night sea. Seventeen special agents drove in fifteen shiny government sedans, a bizarre funeral procession jumping the gun and arriving before the death of the soon-to-be-deceased.

By that time, I was acquainted with Charlie Papp, the kid from the other side of the Mill who came down in to the fields to play by the railroad yards. Charlie's family was better off than most in Eagle Town, well employed by the government for managing the import of rare foodstuffs like onions and yams. Old Man Papp used a home computer, the only one in the township, and communicated with the administration over a long thick cable that sprouted from the top of the white slated Papp home and snaked along the otherwise empty telephone poles down the interstate, off into the dusty distance.

"Don't worry, Charlie—it's a raid, checking basements for clowns. The railroad, like my daddy was doing. "

Charlie was white handed and didn't know the first thing about digging for roots, but he learned quick in the fields by the landfill. He even helped me get revenge on Jack Webster one autumn when we stuffed toads down the retard's pants and watched him hop off down the path screaming that his thing was being eaten. I felt I was giving Charlie an education in self-defense he had missed living in his insulated government regulation house.

When Shingle blew down the interstate, Charlie and I were digging up roots by the underpass, our hands firm in the dirt. But we went running when the siren blasted and the cars went over the rickety wooden bridge dividing the steel mill from the fields. A lazy seagull, in fifty miles from the coast, careened and glided over the train of vehicles, the animal familiar guide to weird caravans, and came to rest on the bridge's head post, a knotted black eye screaming the scene.

"Shingle," I muttered to Charlie.

We ditched the tuber baskets and fled, pounding the dirt by the bridge and heading down the road into town. I had tears in my eyes and started to feel that tense knot in my throat reserved for moments of terror, visions of nightmarish creatures with large predatory fangs. I reached down and held Charlie by the neck, stopping him and pulling him by the side stone marker, a granite block with a single white arrow pointing toward Eagle Town.

"We'd better stay here. When I was your age, my father walked right into the room with that man and I ain't seen him since that day."

He looked up at me with sad drooping eyes. "I hate him," he said.

His words cut through me. They were lacking hope, trailing into thin whispered left unrecognized. They re-

minded me of Sarah's pathetic attempt to drive fat Shingle off our father.

"Don't worry, Charlie," I said. "It's like a raid, checking the basements for clowns. The railroad, like my daddy was doing. They'll do it and we'll stay here. When their cars came back over that bridge, we'll go help the others, okay? I promise, Charlie. I won't let him near you."

Charlie nuzzled his head into my hips and clung to my thighs. He cried and then sat down on the granite block.

But Shingle and his men never came back over the bridge. The raid went on well into the night and from our embankment we could see the lines of white robed citizens being marched off down the road.

Charlie was shaking. "I don't like this." Red-veined fear was popping in his eyes.

I put my arm around him and held tight while sounds of people wailing came drifting over the embankment and highway underpasses, echoing the lamentations of my people through the tunnels of Eagle Town.

"Let's go in—they may need some help." I pulled him along and felt his shoulder struggling. He didn't want to go, but I forced him, pulling his little body by the arms, locking my hands under his armpits. We moved down the highway until we got to Old Mill Road and then turned into the center of town, which was strangely deserted, just a few abandoned cars sweltering in the night heat.

"They all gone, Ben," Charlie was running from store to store looking in through the windows. "He done something bad to them."

Just then a bright spotlight flashed through the night, came down on us squarely as we stood in the clearing. It was burning like the landing lights of some air ship coming down from the clouds.

"Duck, Charlie!" I pushed him to the ground and buried his head beneath my chest and entwined arms. Riddles of bullets coughed up the dust about us, little firecrackers in a mad dance about our crumpled limbs.

A loud voice announced over a P.A. system, "Just keep still and lay there 'til we can come in and get you!"

I lifted up my head, keeping Charlie crushed against my chest and saw, through the dust, the huge shape of Aronius Jay Shingle, Law Enforcer of Eagle County, moving slowly toward us. My heart sank and I felt something lift from my body. It no longer mattered whether I fought or died, or dissolved into the dust. My only concern was for Charlie's safety, so I hurled myself from the ground and dove head on right into the wall of flesh, ramming straight into that stretched white suit with the vest and watch fob.

"Run Charlie! Run!" And Charlie ran, straight off into the night, the crack of insects in the air about him, his screams piercing the blackness. Little kid screams, more horrifying than anything an adult could make.

Huge arms seized me and I felt a brute strength I would have put past Shingle. His grip was viselike and I could barely move, Within seconds I was inert, weeping, muttering my father's name.

"God damn you Yardleys!" came his gruff and disgusting voice. "I never seen such a determined strain."

And I knew what he meant. He saw most of the human race as a virus that proliferated whether they were helpful or harmful to the propagation of the race as a whole. His contempt for humanity was appalling, and caused him to commit heinous acts, atrocities without limits.

He chuckled and turned his angry hold on me into a warm, almost paternal comfort. "You go about your business, Benjamin Yardley. I already wrecked you, right? That's the way I see it. No use belaboring the point, is there?" One hand reached up for his still smoking cigar.

So that was it. The spotlight, the spattering of bullets. He was playing with us, like he played with my sister eight years back. He could have let us go, chuckling at two frightened boys scampering across a town square, but he was determined to dig as many wounds into our memory as he could, chuckling as he spattered bullets and then reached for his megaphone. He was an unopposed wall of irrational power who came to crush families and land with indiscriminate force. And now he was offering to let me go, his mission accomplished.

As I shivered in his arms I allowed myself one moment of imaging he was my father. I dug my chin into his belly and tried to feel warm love. It was fleeting, barely there, more in my imagination than in flesh, and hardly sufficient to satisfy my enormous craving. But it was all I had. For one tiny second, I thought I could almost see his tender face calling across the lonely years, telling that he loved me. Then I let myself go and took off into the night, running faster than time could follow.

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Is a fiction writer and a native New Yorker posing as a computer programmer and Web site developer. Over the last ten years his short stories, poems and essays have appeared in literary magazines, including Chakra, Blue Light Red Light, Bogus Books, Artitude, Cinemaphobia, Forbidden Lines *and Web-based magazines including* Planet Magazine *and* Dark Planet. *He lives in New Jersey with his wife Sandrea and son Kristopher.*

I am Retarded

TOM ARMSTRONG

MY DOG IS SMARTER THAN ME.

Recently, when I arrived home from work—sweaty and tired, my pockets stuffed with currency and gold nuggets, tips from my minimum-wage job driving a dynamite truck—I found Sharik out on the back porch grilling a porterhouse on the hibachi and reading the cantos of Ezra Pound.

"Bad dog," I yelled. "Put that book back on the shelf and get some exercise! Play with your ball!"

He dropped his glasses, came inside, leaped onto his bench and typed the following on his keyboard: "All the other dogs are reading Ezra Pound! You're a very mean master. No other dogs I know have a retarded owner. I want to run away and join a pack! I want to howl with the wolves and study James Joyce!" He ran up the stairs whimpering, his tail between his legs.

His words hurt me deeply. Yes, I am retarded. And there are never fifteen minutes at a time when I can forget.

I feel sorry for my dog. I wish he had a normal person as a master, someone who could give him a better life and love him more. And I wish he had a swimming pool, a one-acre glen and a foul-smells garden in the backyard like his dog friends. But my wages are meager and it would all be far more than what I can afford.

Sharik's unhappiness with me made me deeply sad, which was worrisome for my friends. I called in sick to work for ten days, staying at home with the shades drawn. I started drinking little dark-brown cans of Hershey's chocolate and stopped keeping the currency in my wallet crisply ironed with pleats running down from the presidents' noses.

My dog stayed upstairs in his bedroom, updating his Web site, *rabidwolverines.com,* where he sells books written using software he's developed. The software combines the minds of dead authors for collaborations of new book-length manuscripts. His newest was a cookbook written by Jean-Paul Sartre and Julia Child: *Being, Nothingness and the Perfect Souffle.*

A SONIC BOOM STARTLED ME INTO A STANDING position out of the La-Z-Boy, where I was sleepily getting grilled and shaken. To my surprise, I saw that it was nighttime. A Roman candle lit up the sky in flickering streaks of red. Within a minute, I heard screeching tires from the direction of my driveway.

A normal person could have assimilated these sights and sounds without the need of a lot of synaptic activity, but I am not so lucky. I have to think about what I have just seen and heard and organize its symbolic meaning. The sonic boom, though it was heard throughout the neighborhood, was clearly a signal for me. I am the only retarded person within a square mile, and no one else would need a clue that is so gauche. It means—since this is a Tuesday—that someone is about to arrive. The red Roman candle tells me that it is Cthrwsqwz who is coming over. The red sparks are meant (I think) to suggest Cthrwsqwz's feathery headdress. The screech on the driveway would provide normal listeners with a mother lode of clues. My friends could discern the make of the bike and the exact imprint of the skid just from the sound. And if they knew the motorcycle, they could tell quite a bit about the psychology of the rider and anything he brought with him. But I am retarded; and the most that I can tell is that it must be Cthrwsqwz who is at my door.

My dog is smarter than me. He stayed upstairs, updating his Web site where he sells books written using software he's developed.

It *is* Cthrwsqwz, and he's brought Tjrbkspd with him. I'm delighted. These are my wonderful friends who are especially nice to me. I can see that they intend to stay for a while since they are each carrying in a six-pack of Baffin Island Yodelling Goat, Canada's finest. And Tjrbkspd has a little package of peanut butter-on-cheese crackers for Hairbrush, my parrot. It's so thoughtful; those crackers are Hairbrush's favorite. And Cthrwsqwz has a jar of dill pickle slices. From a tradition started in pick-up bars, one sticks a quartered slice of dill pickle into the throat of a Goat bottle while sipping the brew.

We go into the kitchen, where Hairbrush is quick to join us. It's so much fun for me and my parrot when the guys come over. Hairbrush walks on our heads and does impersonations from the movies she's been watching. "Squawk!" she says, and then, in the voice of Uma Thurman, "the baby tomato is trailing behind as they walk, so the papa tomato goes back and squishes him. And he says 'ketchup.' Squawk—"

We all laugh. The line is from a movie that was broadcast over the Bird Channel. People don't watch movies anymore. They're all too plodding and predictable. But we still recognize a lot of the dialogue.

Hairbrush is lively and animated when the guys are over. It makes me so happy to see her this way. But when she runs out of impersonations, I worry that the guys will quickly get bored and will find excuses to leave. That never quite happens, but I feel I'm on the spot to try to think about things to say myself. I try sometimes to tell the guys about explosions that have happened at work recently, but I talk very slowly and I can sense that they are antsy for me to get out of my mouth more quickly what it is I have to say.

Happily, Cthrwsqwz and Tjrbkspd never tire of talking, and before their spirits have a chance to flag, they are into friendly fights over their favorite topics, which range from *Beetlejuice* to Zen Buddhism.

And tonight the guys get to yammering at full throttle. Cthrwsqwz begins gesticulating frenetically. His fingers splay and twitch. He tugs at his shirt and moves about in choppy steps. The words come like a geyser. "Yicmeatlo uplorpco splek. Brando as santos de bardo," was a part of what he said.

Tjrbkspd watches in that intensely focussed way he has, sometimes gesturing in tandem with Cthrwsqwz. Tjrbkspd jumps in with his siren of melded syllables when Cthrwsqwz pauses. I could catch only a few disconnected phrases: "optimize breakflow … phojvolky torpe the younger type… remedial messenger, zenmar… how were the beefsteak tomatoes… screamers, tathagalpagarba!… PHOT!"

I listened intently to the conversation, participating as best I could—but as we all knew, I understood very little of what was going on. When they laughed at something, I laughed, too. But inside I felt fear and embarrassment. What we were laughing about, I couldn't know.

Cthrwsqwz and Tjrbkspd are very kind to me. And their kindness is genuine. But it has to be as frustrating for them as it is for me that I understand only a little of what they talk about.

I was caught off-guard when suddenly their yakking stopped and they were staring at me. I tried to seem nonchalant, tearing at the Goat label and poking at my pickle, but it seemed that everyone's attention was directed toward me. Even Hairbrush, who stood on the refrigerator, was giving me a stony stare.

At issue was getting me to agree to go with them to a club the next evening. Apparently I was needed for some research they were conducting. I agreed to go, for fear of the consequences of not agreeing to go, and this pleased the guys. Then they told me that Sariphina-platt was likely to be there, and this made me very nervous.

When our get-togethers end, they always leave together. I can hear them starting up their conversation again as they scruff down the walkway, popping a wheelie and throwing thunderbolts into the spittoons. I can see that it is easier for them to get into the flow and excitement of their discussion when they do not have to try to include me.

UP UNTIL A YEAR AGO, I WAS IN A SPOTTY, LONG-term relationship with the retarded woman Sariphina-platt. Every few weeks, we arranged to meet at her friend's house where we drank fermented grape juice and made love in the animal way. This is considered primitive and silly by average, smart people, but we enjoyed ourselves. Once, for a solid week, we insulated ourselves from all the pressures of being retarded. We holed up in an old-style hotel, talked simply to each other, loved each other, and tried to forget about other people and the culture we live in that is so complicated for us. For fun, we played two-dimensional chess in bed and finished games even if one of us was ahead by a knight or a passed pawn.

Our bodies are not considered beautiful or sexy, primarily because we cannot afford all the surgery and tattoos that are *de rigueur*. Sariphina-platt has taken care to keep her hands stylish and heavily tattooed and has a modest job as a hand model for television commercials.

After our delightful week together, we went back to our jobs and pretended not to know each other. Time passed, and I didn't call or e- mail Sariphina-platt. While anyone who comes to know either of us will quickly be aware that we aren't smart about anything, we try not to make people uncomfortable, so we pretend as best we can to seem normal. On those times when either of us sees another retarded person on the street, we quietly but quickly turn away.

I don't pine for Sariphina-platt, but I think of her sometimes. I think of what it must be like to live comfortably in the world, like real people. And in my dreams, sometimes Sariphina-platt and I are married with a large family. In these dreams, when people talk to us, we always understand whatever is being said. And our infant children are robust and supremely normal—jumping off the bookcases and chasing each other around the living room with firelogs and scissors.

I PICKED UP ALL THE HERSHEY'S CANS IN THE LIVING room, and generally cleaned up my house. It seemed to calm my extreme nervousness about the club date with Cthrwsqwz and Tjrbkspd with its possibility of running into Sariphina-platt. I tried to think up excuses to get out of it, but in our society, the worst thing a person can do is be unsociable. And my retardation makes me very vulnerable.

Last year Cthrwsqwz had a three-dimensional name that was impossible for me to pronounce. For my benefit, he wore his name as a medallion on a chain around his neck. But one day he came over after he had dyed his chest

hairs blue and, to be more stylish, had one of his arms surgically removed. When I saw him I couldn't recognize him. When word got around about my trouble identifying him, this bothered a lot of people. For a while there was talk about putting me in an institution for retarded people (called a university) where I could get care and lodging, and with help might get a Master's that would help me to cope with the people of this world, 99 percent of whom are much smarter than me.

It remains a matter of intense fear that I might one day find myself dragged away in a straitjacket to Rutgers or UCLA where I'll have to do term papers and go to football games.

Sharik came downstairs from his room while I was cleaning. He had sensed my fear and nervousness—this wonderful dog—and wanted to give me comfort. He had me sit on the couch where he placed his head on my lap and let me stroke the brown fur on his head.

That morning, I had bought him the complete works of Proust and Balzac, setting the books just outside his bedroom door. And earlier still, I sent him an e-mail saying it would be fine with me if he read Pound anytime he wanted to.

THAT EVENING, CHTRWSQWZ AND TJRBKSPD arrived at my house as planned. Tjrbkspd was wearing a shirt in a color I hadn't seen before. The new primary colors that the scientists are releasing are an overload for my sense of sight, but whenever I first see a new one, it fascinates me. The new color is called frobjnicht. Tjrbkspd tells me that the color isn't the primary color in its pure form; rather, it's a reddish yiktatish frobjnicht with perhaps a hint of yellow and scormeare.

Then, Cthrwsqwz said to me in his speedy way "Validium grenidine thor *brak!*"

Validium is an old word that will expire in a week. It means "hop on the back of my bike." I don't know the words "grenidine" or "thor," but if what he really said was "grenitheen door" it would mean "the clouds are made of buttermilk." But what *that* might mean in the context of anything he would have to say to me, I cannot imagine. *Brak!* can variously mean "remove your pants" or "would you like a soft drink with your sprouts sandwich?" In any case, I hopped on the back of the motorcycle.

I ride as the third person on the bike, hanging onto Tjrbkspd's waist, smiling stupidly as I stare into his shirt.

We arrive at the club which, like many in town, has a name that cannot be pronounced. Its name is four dimensional, made from light and time.

The gist of what I'm told is that it's a gorpfucking club. Learning this scares me. I'm far too stupid to get involved with any gorpfucking, but Cthrwsqwz assures me that I needn't be anxious. He takes me to an anteroom inside the building and has me strip off my clothes. He places a helmet on my head that is lined with computer chips and has wires, transistors and metal plates on the outside. I am reluctant to wear this thing, partly because I think that anything with transistors must be a cruel practical joke. But Cthrwsqwz is a genuinely nice person (all the smart people are genuinely nice), so, with assurances from Tjrbkspd, I do what I am directed to do.

***Validium* is an old word that will expire in a week. It means "hop on the back of my bike."**

In the center of the building there is a large hall crowded with people conversing with each other in small groups. So far as I can see, I am the only person who is naked or wearing a helmet. The others are all young and are fully and stylishly dressed. Many have wonderful tattoos and arms that are attached to their bodies in interesting places. While I can tell nothing about their behavior that seems odd, I know from my limited knowledge of clubs like this one that some are gorpfucking.

I wander about the hall, losing sight of Cthrwsqwz and Tjrbkspd. I am pretty much ignored by all the people, but several glance over at me, looking first at my helmet, then at my face and then quickly at my genitals. This creates in me an odd mixture of embarrassment and excitement.

After a while, I see Sariphina-platt several yards away. She, too, is naked and wearing a helmet. I approach her, but when I am as near as three feet, something magnetic at the front of our helmets causes our heads to lock in contact so firmly that we cannot pull away.

My brain is then captured, like a rabbit in a snare. But for reasons I cannot understand, my sense of fear quickly ends, and it is as if the clouds have parted, revealing a sky that is a beautiful blue. And then the sky parts and the sun and stars come into focus and they are divine. I am in awe of how perfect it is. The beauty and my bliss are so intense and so complete that it is both unbearable and unbearable to suppose the feeling might end and my knowledge of the feeling might fade. I am hopelessly in love in a universe that is compassionate and just as it has to be. I am together with Sariphina-platt in a cavalcade of laughing and weeping. Our thoughts are not coded in words, but pass like a river flowing between us. It is ultimate beauty. Serene and delightful. Majestic and ineffable.

IT WAS HARD TO RETURN TO THE ROUTINE OF MY LIFE and job after that night of gorpfucking, but I was able to, and I was glad my depression had ended.

Sariphina-platt began discussing with me the possibility of our combining our households. She had in mind the

idea of leaving her apartment above a bowling alley and moving into my house. Of course, I am gleeful at the prospect.

I had her come over to my house where she met Sharik and Hairbrush. Sharik played ball with her and, if he wasn't actually having a good time, he pretended that he was. He told me afterward that he thinks Sariphina-platt is very, very nice. Sariphina-platt told me that my dog is wonderful and that my parrot is a joy. Things went very well. As Sariphina-platt was leaving, Hairbrush sang " 'Til We Meet Again," in the voice of Marlene Dietrich, which left all of us in tears.

"There is one last thing," Sariphina-platt told me as she got into a taxicab. "We will have to get the approval of my Clydesdale. You must meet him on Thursday."

Her horse. It seems that the horse her parents bought her when she was small makes most of the decisions for her in life. Sariphina-platt is anxious, but insists that there is no getting around the need for our getting the approval of Rising Star before we can move in together.

"There's something you need to know," she went on to say, "Rising Star is also Equus Majorca, the leader of the equine separatist movement."

Of course, I am astonished. While for the most part it is considered rude for humans to stick their noses into the politics of other species, all news-aware humans know Equus Majorca, the author of *We'll Take Colorado,* a manifesto that demands that human-run America cede territory to set up an all-horse republic in the Rocky Mountains. Already, horses have taken over many of the suburbs of Denver and Colorado Springs. To further their political agenda, horses have been lying down on the runway at the Denver Airport to prevent planes from landing.

The horse demands have recently been strengthened by support from many other animals. Felines United argues that humans should be eager to give up a state that is simplistically rectangular. But as a geometry-wise antelope writer pointed out in a *National Geographic* editorial, due to the curvature of the earth, Colorado is actually more of a rhombus. Others argue that humans should keep the state because it's a parallelogram. Congress tried to end the uprising by simply passing legislation declaring Colorado to be circular.

I AM WEARING A NEW FROBJNICHT-COLORED SUIT when I arrive at Sariphina-platt's apartment. Her living room is large, clean and fashionable with photographs on the walls showing her lovely hands holding wrought iron perches and seed dispensers.

"Brak!" she says.

"Yes," I reply. "I *would* like a Dr Pepper with my sprouts sandwich."

We have a cordial conversation while seated on her sofa. I can hear below us the loud noises of bowling balls striking pins. And from a room nearby I hear the stomping sound of a large horse walking about.

"I have to tell you," says Sariphina-platt, "that moving in with you would be a great convenience for us since the bowling alley is having us evicted for making too much noise."

I smile in reply, gobbling down the last bite of the delicious sprouts sandwich.

When it is time for the interview my attention turns toward the slimy feel of sweat covering my body. I loosen my necktie a tad and worry that her horse will be offended by the placement of my arms in sockets at each shoulder.

SARIPHINA-PLATT LEADS ME TO THE END OF A SHORT hallway where we stop in front of dutch doors. The top door is pushed open by the nose of an enormous beige horse who whinnies and then runs behind a curtain.

It is quickly evident that behind the curtain is where the horse keeps his keypad, because a Times Square-style Linotype at the back of the room quickly spells out the word "Welcome."

"Welcome to you, too!" I blurt.

"I hope that we become fast friends," says a line of new words. "While I am known for insisting that humans call me Equus Majorca, I would like you to call me by the name Sariphina-platt gave me at the time of my birth, Rising Star!"

"Thank you, Rising Star," I say. "Please call me Freedjor, which is my label this week."

"Thank you, Freedjor" says the Linotype. "Can I know you by the name you were given at birth?"

"Well," I say, "when I was born they just called me 'the baby.' "

"Then I will call you Freedjor this week," says the line of type. "Greetings, Freedjor!"

It tickles me to see my new name in all those large letters. This horse is a very nice one. "Greetings to you, Rising Star!"

"You should know, Freedjor, that my activities with the equine separatists will be ongoing and can only intensify. As much as I love Sariphina-platt and respect many humans, I cannot forget that humans have been on our back for thousands of years and have murdered us to make dog food and glue."

At this point, Sariphina-platt has started to weep. I place my arm around her shoulder and say, "I would love for you and Sariphina-platt to come and live with me and my wolf, Sharik, and my parrot, Hairbrush. Sharik, by the way, is a strict vegetarian. We will all be close friends."

"Your offer warms my heart. I know that you and Sariphina-platt belong together and that you can have a

normal life. As for myself, I want to take you up on your offer, but I must go to Colorado! When we are evicted from our apartment by the bowling alley, I would like for Sariphina-platt to move in with you while I go to Colorado to advance the welfare of noble horses. We can remain in close contact by e-mail. And, of course, we can visit each other frequently!"

Sariphina-platt is inconsolable.

"I will take good care of Sariphina-platt," I say.

"Wonderful!" reads the Linotype. "Things are being arranged. As Sariphina-platt may have told you, my hobby is ballooning. What with the problems at the airports in Colorado, I will get there by balloon. The launch in scheduled for the 25th."

AT THE PARK ON THE 25TH A LARGE CROWD GATHERS. While the majority of creatures are horses, there are many other animals including hundreds of supportive humans, many wearing T-shirts that read "They *deserve* Colorado! We should throw in Wyoming for good measure!"

Rising Star addresses the crowd while standing in the basket of his red-and-blue balloon. The Linotype machine is set up in front of him. For the occasion, Rising Star is "a horse of a different color," having dyed his coat a marvelous shade of splendorfus, a brand-new color that makes people think of happiness.

Sariphina-platt, Sharik and I are nearby. Hairbrush is fifty yards away fighting with some other birds for perch space on the branch of a tree. I am proud of Sariphina-platt, who is holding up bravely. She dabs at the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Greetings to you all!" reads Rising Star's first burst of words. "I leave for Colorado with feelings of love and friendship! For me, this is the beginning of a grand adventure. Still, I am overwhelmed with sorrow. I will miss many friends and, especially, I will miss Sariphina-platt, who is so dear."

As the ropes are loosened to release the balloon, Sariphina-platt kicks off her red slippers, breaks from my side and leaps into the basket of the balloon with Rising Star. The humans in the crowd cheer and the many horses whinny. Rising Star bobs his head and Sariphina-platt waves robustly at the crowd as the balloon ascends into the blue sky. I watch as the balloon, Rising Star and Sariphina-platt grow dim as a tiny gray dot. Finally, they disappear behind a solitary white cloud and leave my life forever.

A MONTH LATER, THERE IS NO SONIC BOOM THAT precedes Cthrwsqwz's visit to my home. He carries in several boxes of varying sizes and introduces me to a woman he has brought with him, a Dr. Brendafsh who is wearing an official-looking white jacket.

I am scared. Sharik barks at our visitors and I tenderly restrain him.

The Wednesday before, I was fired from my job after driving erratically—some said suicidally—on the freeway with a full load of explosives. It was a terrible day; the police handcuffed me and I didn't earn any tips.

The news that Cthrwsqwz has for me is that he and my friends have committed me to a university where I am to take advanced courses in comparative lit and animal husbandry. All this is meant to help me to cope with the strains of living in a world that I experience as very complex. The university that has accepted me is just down the street, so I won't have to relocate. And thanks to Sharik, there's enough money coming in so I won't have to get a new job.

Sales of Sharik's books are booming. A series on existential cooking tops the Amazon.com best-sellers list.

At Sharik's Web site, sales of his books are booming. A series on existential cooking tops the Amazon.com best-sellers list. One volume released just days ago, co-written by Erika Jong and Albert Camus, *Fear of Frying for Strangers,* has recipes for pork chops that make your mouth water no matter what your state of angst. The top Religion and Spirituality book is Sharik's *The Son Also Rises,* by Matthew, Mark, John, and Ernest Hemingway.

The boxes contain the final version of the gorpfucking helmets that Cthrwsqwz has been working on. They look very much like football helmets. Whatever chips and mechanics are involved in making the machines operate are hidden inside. By their appearance, the helmets seem made of fiberglass. The inside is lined with a comfortable-looking padding. A chin strap holds the helmet in place on one's head.

Dr. Brendafsh places the largest helmet on me and makes several adjustments with her three hands. My fear melts away. I have often depended on the kindness of smart strangers.

"Brak!" says Dr. Brendafsh.

MY HEART PUMPS LIKE MAD. I AM HIGH ABOVE THE ground, flying among the clouds. Sharik is there, his tail wagging so hard that his hindquarters moves right and left. Hairbrush is flying happy and free. And the sky is an azure German river; and the stars are rhinestones, glistening. My dreamy thoughts are not coded in words, but pass like a river flowing in front of me. It is ultimate beauty. Serene and delightful. Majestic and ineffable. I feel like I could live forever. And I am lost in swirling

thoughts that combined my memories and the possibilities in an unlimited future.

O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and scormeare and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a boy where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in her hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a frobjnicht shirt yes and how she kissed me in that sad hotel and I thought well as well her as another and then I asked her with my eyes to ask again yes and then she asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around her yes and drew her down to me so she could feel my loins and smell the whiff of musk and yes and my heart was going like mad and yes I said

yes
I will
Yes.

TOM ARMSTRONG

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Take Us We Bulls

WILL SAND

They came in peace. They left in peace.
So now *what?*

ALONE IN HIS ORNATE OFFICE, ADJUNCT AIDE Douglas drew himself a brandy. He set the decanter back on the mantle, walked to his settee, and let out a self-satisfied sigh.

Was it possible to be pompous while alone? He silently laughed at himself.

He picked up the alien book. The crusty sheen on its cover, while slightly disgusting, was also a mark of value, of distinction. The alien leader, by way of autographing, had sprayed on this copy before he personally presented it to the human representative who had guided their whirlwind visit. Stifling his innate curiosity, Douglas had yet to sniff this veneer, but from a hand-held distance the secretion was odorless to humans.

It hardly had been the dramatic First Contact envisioned by either scientists or science-fiction writers. It was thoroughly anticlimactic. A week ago humanity was ignorant of their existence; now they were two days gone. And nothing had changed. They neither took nor left anything. But in those few days, not much more than a hundred hours, they had visited every corner of the earth. Douglas had been one of the leaders of the delegation that had escorted them.

A week ago humanity was ignorant of their existence; now they were two days gone. And nothing had changed.

Yet he still didn't know what properly to call them. In the book they had distributed to humanity in fourteen languages, they simply referred to themselves as "we the 650 billion." They evidently defined themselves by their population, presumably up-to-date and cumulative.

650,000,000,000.

It was a bit awkward as far as nomenclature goes. However, as the only alien species yet encountered, calling them simply and generically the "aliens" worked out fine.

Douglas found himself unconsciously caressing the book. He felt a glow: from the brandy, from a job well done, from friends newly made. The feel of their book, as anointed, aptly mimicked their alien skin. Some had looked upon that skin as deeply pocked, a body-wide angry acne. But he saw those flowing red ridges and brown furrows as a rich leathery meringue. Doctors had speculated on the benefits of such a vastly increased surface area. Douglas had just marveled at its multicolored, textured beauty. It suited the animal health that percolated beneath their far-seeing dignity.

He opened the book. Its title alone would invite volumes of scholarly interpretation. Given that any translation would be imperfect—even one conducted by such an advanced intelligence—the title and various passages were vexing in their imprecision while haunting in their poetry.

He read the title aloud: "Take Us We Bulls." Bold. Enigmatic.

The book was about them: a primer, perhaps a bible. History, philosophy, religion, all in one. They seemed to make no distinction.

There was a dichotomy about the title that appealed to Douglas, even as he struggled for its meaning. "Take us…." Apparently they willingly and eagerly give themselves up to the universe, to forces greater than themselves, forces they see as powerful, intriguing, and benign. Yet the other half—"…We Bulls"—moves from the passive to the active, from humility to pride, from "us" to "we" to "bulls." With both acceptance and determination, these aliens engage the universe; they are part of its scope. They seek the destiny that awaits them, that is their due. As do we, Douglas thought; there is that bond between us. *All*iens.

His door intoned: *Visitor Visitor*. A female voice. "It's me, Douglas. Victoria."

She sounded shaken and, upon entering, looked disheveled. She waved aside his offer of an after-hours brandy.

She plopped herself onto his couch, slumped deep into it, and then, with nervous effort, sat upright on its edge. "You've been summoned." By way of explanation, she added, "I've been in the First Office."

Douglas nodded. There were rumors of an affair. Coworkers everywhere, he thought wryly—and then, fondly, of Roger.

"Douglas," she said, "Douglas." And began crying.

He started to go to her but she abruptly rose. She paced as she fought for control. When she turned back to him, she had regained it, though the battle left her white.

Douglas had been transfixed by her anxiety. Now he found his voice. "What…"

She cut him off. "We've been getting calls. Reports. It started, God, less than an hour ago. Hundreds by now; thousands soon." She sighed, trailing off, "Millions…."

"Come on, Victoria! What reports?"

"From all over the world. Births. Newborns with red and brown… *crusty ridges….*" She started weeping again.

"Their skin."

Douglas was frozen in his seat. Finally his head dropped. *Take Us We Bulls.* The book was still open in his lap, on the first page. He gaped and then gasped.

The first sentence now read, "We the 660 billion…."

WILL SAND

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Is that your *final* answer?