

LAST PAGE OF EXISTING BOOK.

AFTER - WORDS .

I am deeply grateful to HarperPerennial for the opportunity to add an extra 32 pages to this edition of The Cheese Monkeys. If you read what follows, you'll see why. Or not.

And now . . .

A DISCARDED (AND RECOVERED) SLICE OF
THE CHEESE MONKEYS.

Having read the first draft of this novel, both my editor and my agent were in solid agreement on one point: Winter did not appear soon enough. My feeling was that he was worth waiting for, but my protests were overruled. The consensus: cut whatever was unnecessary before he shows up in order to bring him "on stage" sooner. For the most part, I didn't have a problem cutting bits to do this—with one big, fat exception.

Originally, in the first semester Maybelle was rushing a sorority, the Tri Delts, with an intended tragicomic effect. This culminated in a scene set in an "old folks" home at the edge of town and involved Maybelle, Happy, Himillsy, and a trio of biddies in varying states of dementia. And a human being named Muffin.

While everyone agreed it was a hoot to read, it was also decided that it did nothing to advance the plot. I begged to differ—I thought it added valuable insight into Himillsy's character. It humanized her, made her more sympathetic, cracked her bakelite veneer. My editor then suggested moving the scene to somewhere in the Spring semester, after Winter debuts. But that was impossible—rush season is in the fall, no way around that. Try it as a flashback? Too forced. There was just no sensible place to put it after Winter's entrance.

*And that was that. Gone. It's not that I harbor any deep resentment about it (some critics **still** complained that Winter appears a little late to the table), but I did hold out hope that someday there'd be an edition in which it's restored.*

So, here it is, however out of context. What follows would have started on page 74 of the finished book (right before Thanksgiving vacation).

Believe it or not, it is based on a true story.

—C. K.

WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE WIZENED.

A week later, Dottie had us all use the hand we didn't draw with to draw the hand we did. Completely disorienting. The results were predictably sad.

"Who would have thought it would be so easy to feel so severely retarded?" Himillsy took a magic marker and scratched a face onto her right fist, like Senor Wenses. She held it up and made it a puppet. "Can you draw me?" she squeaked, working its thumb-knuckle mouth. "If you can, you could have an exiting career as a hopeless BUCKETHEAD!"

"Or an art teacher," I offered.

"What do you mean 'Or'?"

Maybelle quietly interrupted our laughter.

"Um. I . . ." Quite sheepish. She had our undivided attention. "Well, as you know, I'm rushing Tri Delts." Hims tossed me a tired look.

Yes, we knew that. It was all she had talked about for the last month—when we'd let her get a word in edgewise.

There were forty-three fraternities and twenty-two sororities at State, catering to every imaginable class and quirk. Translation: if you couldn't get into at least one of them, you were either a convicted felon with no arms and no legs, or attending another school. Delta Delta Delta was the most prestigious sorority on campus, or more honestly, the hardest one to get into. They actually had the reputation for looking like Sandra Dee and behaving like Gypsy Rose Lee, minus the discretion and brains. There wasn't a men's room within a mile of campus that didn't have a wall scrawled with "Tried everyone else? Try Deltas!" As far as I was concerned all the sororities were a joke. None of them had houses—they were all headquartered in the dorms. And fraternities? Forget it. Where fools rushed in, I feared to tread.

Anyway, the vision of Maybelle flocking with those bottle blond vultures would have been nothing but a mirage, except for the fact that she was a Legacy—Mummy had been a Tri Delt at Duke back when Martha Washington was in knee socks, and she was still a contributing dues payer. That meant as long as her lovely daughter fulfilled all the rush and pledge requirements, the Deltas had to take her. This amused Mills and me no end. "Can you imagine? They've been dealt a dolt!"

Now Maybelle was about to ask us something dire.

"I was wondering. You see, I have to do something this week to get my Happiness Ribbon, and Muffin—Muffin? you know, my big rush sister?—had an idea that's just *aces*."

Hims didn't breathe.

"But I'm going to need a little help. Is that a thought I could have?"

Oh, Christ.

"You see, since I'm an art major, Muff got the *ginchiest* idea. She candy-stripes at the Lasthaven rest home, outside of town? And she said 'Why don't you and a couple of your art buddies come by this weekend and, you know, do portraits of folks? They'd go bananas!' Well I just swooned. And you're both so good. Your technique just towers over mine. It would only be an hour or two. I just *can't* do it alone. What do you—"

"We'd love to." I couldn't believe my ears. Hims gave me a conspiratorial nod, and the slightest trace of a smile. "Be fun," she said.

My lips started moving. "Yeah, it. Would."

• • •

The white Corvair pulled up in front of Mifflin Hall at one-thirty that Sunday afternoon, and I was quite pleased to find not the slightest trace of my vomit on its gleaming hide. "Oh, *woo-hoo!*" she chimed. I got in and we turned down towards South halls. The car was even filthier inside than I remembered. Mills wore white kid gloves, a sleeveless avocado cotton shirt dress, Ray-bans and a cream colored kerchief poised over her head and knotted around her neck. Very Grace Kelly. We came upon a STOP sign. She ignored it.

"And why are we doing this, exactly?" I asked.

"Oh come on. Sunday afternoons are *supposed* to be depressing. Who are we to buck tradition?"

"Yes, well. You could have checked with me before agreeing for both of us."

"Oh. Sorry to tear you away from the *beau monde* of North Halls. We'll see that we get you back in time for the *Season*." We stopped in front of Maybelle's building. There she was, all crinolines and trepidations.

"Howdy, y'all!"

In addition to her art supplies, she was lugging a big Macy's shopping bag. She put it in the trunk.

"What's in there?" I asked, as I did the gentlemanly thing and let her have the passenger seat. I crawled with my portfolio case into the decrepit little storage space behind them.

"Oh, you'll see." she said, a little uneasily, and climbed in next to Himillsy, who gunned the engine and released the brake.

"Okay, kids!" she cheered, "We're off to see the Wizenened! The wonderful Wizenened and Odd!"

Lasthaven turned out to be about twenty-five miles west of town, deep in farm country. Maybelle read the directions. We went past the BPOE Hunting Lodge (just gearing up for the fall), The Tuft Trees country club and the Dairy Squeeze. Then on through fields dotted with cows and the odd horse. At a small roadside pumpkin stand, Maybelle said "Turn here," pointing to an unmarked lane off the highway lined with firs, to the right. We followed the path for about five minutes and came to a large one-story brick building flanked by elm trees.

I wasn't looking forward to this. As a member of our

church youth choir, I was forced to sing at our local 'rest home' as often as twice a year. It was rarely pleasant, as reminders of our imminent decay and misery tend not to be.

We got out of the car and Maybelle rang the bell. Silence, then a figure balancing what appeared to be an enormous white tray on its head approached and answered the door.

"I'm Sister Mary Cephas. So lovely of you to come." She showed us in.

"Himillsy. *Look.*" I said, sotto voce. Her eyes joined mine.

Sister Cephas's wimple: now *that* was a wimple. It was an epic achievement of vestry—the Hoover Dam of head-dresses. It surely must have required at least two attendants to allow it to safely mount her skull every morning. I turned to Hims. She was awed.

"Oh my God. It's art. It's head art. Her neck must be made of steel. I want one."

You could have landed a helicopter onto the roof of its starched, white expanse. She should have sold advertising space on its descending sides to help with the cost of the material. When she turned her head, my hair flapped in the breeze. I imagined that wimples everywhere laid awake at night, hoping to someday achieve this supreme state of wimpledom.

Hims scanned the area "All the other nuns are wearing *snoods.*" she whispered, even though no one else was in sight. "She must be their *queen.*"

Sister Cephas led us to an anteroom behind double

glass doors. "I think you'll be most comfortable in here." She withdrew from her black cloak a massive ring of keys and toyed with them until she found what she wanted.

She turned the lock, cracked the left door, and the smell hit us: a thousand sour roses, the lifted leg of time on an ornamental ruin. We inhaled it—an inescapable attempt to shroud the sad fact of the human condition in a curdled fog of flowery disinfectant. I started to cough.

"Here are some chairs. Make yourselves at home." Cephas turned and left. Maybelle looked at us a little guiltily.

"Well, Muffin should be along any moment. We'd better change."

"Change?" Hims asked it for both of us.

Maybelle lifted the Macy's bag. "Well, yes. A Delt tradition. Wait'll you see—it's *charming*, really." She pulled out a flouncy white silk smock with three black triangles embroidered across the front and a giant bow at the neck. "See?"

"You're joking." Himillsy folded her arms in front of her.

"Well, no. You see, these are . . . the *trappings* we must assume in order to receive the kiss of the Muse! It's a Delt law." She pulled out a black felt beret the size of a pizza. "Topped off with this."

"Oh, my God." Hims turned away. Maybelle became desperate.

"I—I'm sorry, but we *have* to. Muffin will be here any minute. If we're not in costume--"

I gave Mills a furious look that said *'You're the one who*

agreed to this. Happy? I turned to Maybelle. "Here. Give me mine." She pulled it out of the bag.

I yanked the poofy smock over my head. "Come'on, Hims. Snap to." I had never spoken to her like that before. She glared at me and put her hand in the bag like it was filled with piranhas.

"If either of you so much as *breathe* a word of this to anyone, I will find you and beat you until you look like Sid Caesar." She pulled on the beret, which was easily three times as wide as her head. Luckily, it had pull strings to adjust the band and make it hug her cranium. She pushed the felt overhang to the left and back. The smock would have fit four of her.

"Deal." I replied.

The squeak of rubber wheels came toward us from somewhere. A door opened to the right.

"Mabes, *dear*. Oh, don't you all look *adorable*."

It was the Human Being Called Muffin, pushing a wheelchair like it was a bar cart.

But it wasn't drinks.

It was a skeleton, wrapped in translucent skin through which a road map of veins worked its way in all directions. Its jaw lay slack, no longer able to contain the tongue. A pale pink mum as big as a softball burdened the left lapel of its robe and threatened to pull it off altogether—an image I refused to let myself conjure. *My God*, I thought, *she used to be someone*.

"This is Rosie," Muffin chirped, as if the thing in the chair was her prize poodle. "Rosie, are you ready for your close-up?" The eyelids retracted up and out of

sight, unveiling dull yellowish whites--no pupils. "Rosie, look who's here to see you! Come now, we want to be at our best, don't we." She produced a syringe full of a blue liquid. "Time for a wakey-wakey!" Muffin winked at us and put the needle into one of the veins in Rosie's arm. The woman was still, then started to twitch. Her eyeballs slowly descended and set themselves on something in an unreachable distance. "There we are." said Muffin. "Back to the land of the living. I'll just be a second," and she was off.

No one spoke. You could practically hear hair grow in the room. Ours, anyway.

Then Rosie's jaw started to rise and her tongue reluctantly returned to the cave of her mouth. The 'wakey' was kicking in.

Muffin soon popped back in with another wheelchair. "Bettina, say hi to our *friends*! They're going to make your picture! Isn't that lovely?"

"I hope so!" said the woman, joyous with expectation. She was as adorable as Rosie was terrifying—Norman Rockwell could not have hoped for better. Mid-to-late seventies, just a little plump, ice-blue flip hairdo and the face of a ripened cherub. As Muffin left to fetch another subject, I thought '*this one's mine,—Maybelle can have Nosferatu.*'

"What lovely dresses!" said Bettina, "You girls have such *flair*!"

I winced. Maybelle thanked her nervously and started to arrange her tools. Himillsy was on low boil.

Rosie's mouth was opening and closing with gradually

increasing speed. I noticed this out of the corner of my eye—I couldn't look at her straight on any more. I just couldn't. I pretended to scrub an invisible stain from the hem of my smock.

"Pidge, slow *down!*" Muffin's voice issued from down the hall. The door burst open and a small woman in a bright pink quilted housecoat, blue fun-fur slippers and a frantic look on her face ran in, surveyed the area, and bolted for the glass doors on the opposite side. She was almost through by the time Muffin made it into the room. "Pidge, dear, stop!" Too late. Pidge bounded for the foyer and out of sight. Muffin sped after her and we heard a mild scuffle, followed by muffled scolds. Bettina was oblivious, all smiles and sunshine. Rosie's jaw shifted from second gear into third as Muffin led a cowed and sheepish Pidge back into the room, closed the door behind them and sat her down in front of Himillsy.

"She's just a bundle of energy, our Pidge!"

So was her hair—a sort of inverted volcano shape spraying out in all directions from her head. She had a healthy taste for make-up. Her eyes glowered from behind a Lone Ranger's disguise of her mascara, and the rouge on her cheeks looked like it had been applied with a trowel and a shaky hand. Lipstick orbited her slit of a mouth in reckless proportions.

"Bettina, which is your best side?" asked Maybelle, plunking herself down right in front of the sweet old thing and fixing the drawing pad on her lap. "Gee, I don't know," Bettina tittered, "you're the artist!" I could have strangled Maybelle—boy was I going to let her have

it. Now I was stuck with Rosie—whom I would have to draw from peripheral vision. I planted myself as far away from her as discretion would allow.

“Okay, are we all set?” asked Muffin. Before any of us could answer she said “Great! I’ll check on you in a little while!” and vanished like mist. The instant she was out of sight Pidge sprang from her seat and made at the doors to the foyer. Locked. She issued a frustrated little peep and hopped up and down. Then she backed up about ten feet, made a run for it and slammed into the doors with a force that shook the room. I was amazed—she couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds. She reared up for another try.

“Um, pardon m—” I said helplessly.

WHAM!

Maybelle was dumb with terror. Himillsy, bemused, started sketching studiously. Pidge, panting like a whip-pet, prepared for the next charge. I decided to stay out of her way—with any luck either the doors would give or she’d tire herself out before turning every bone in her tiny body into gravel. Suddenly Muffin poked her head in from across the room.

“Did I leave my wipies in he—*Pidge!*”

WHAM!

Muffin was on her in a heartbeat. Pidge, shellshocked, offered no struggle. Soon she was reseated, and held in place by thick canvas straps with buckles.

At this point Rosie’s set of teeth were clattering like castanets. Muffin, satisfied that everything was under control, stuffed her pockets with wipies and left. We got

down to business. I adjusted the massive overhang of my beret so that enough of Rosie was obscured to enable me to face her. I started with the bottom of the chair, which was all I could see.

Maybelle, somewhat soothed by Bettina's immunity to the macabre goings on, was well under way, with a semi-steady hand and a fiercely focused eye.

After twenty minutes, I got up to stretch and wandered over to Himillsy. Pidge, with a longing, far away gaze in her eyes and head thoughtlessly askew to the left, looked like Howdy Doody's dark family secret. Himillsy had captured her pretty well, right down to the smeared mascara and silent desperation—Munch would have been jealous.

Once the figure was done, Hims started adding a shape behind it. Pidge stirred slightly. She was trying to say something.

"Mmmm--"

Himillsy was drawing some sort of landscape in the distance. With a pointy top. A mountain?

"Mmmus--"

No, not a mountain.

"Mmuush--"

A person.

"Mmushro--"

A very skinny person, in a dark hood. Carrying a tree?

"Mmuushroo--"

No, a sickle.

"Himillsy!" I cried, "For God's sake!"

"Mmushrooms." Pidge finally managed, then refo-

cused her eyes at us. "You all look . . . like mushrooms." A little frightened now, "Where am I?"

"Oh, great," muttered Hims. "Taunted by Raggedy Ancestor. I need this like a split lip." Then, louder, to Pidge, "You're in a specially marked section of your grocer's freezer!"

"Oh, no!" squeaked Pidge, petrified. She tested the straps for all they were worth.

"Mills, enough." I scolded. "We'll have to peel her off the ceiling." I went back to my seat to make as short work of finishing this thing as possible. Himillsy sighed and returned to her pad, flipping the page and starting another.

After ten more minutes, I was just about done. Then Pidge broke the silence.

"You never come to shop here anymore." Her voice was so small, her tone so full of despair and want, Himillsy halted and looked up at her,

"I--"

"You used to come, every day." A single tear leaked from her right eye and blazed a slow, dark trail down her cheek. "Why did you stop?"

Maybelle finished her drawing. She turned it around to show it to Bettina. "There," she said "what do you think of that?"

"My goodness," She held it in her lap, admiring. Maybelle, encouraged by her beaming face, cheered up. Then Bettina said "It's a piece of poo!" Jubilant. Maybelle was

incredulous.

“Wha—”

“Who told you you could draw? Stinkeroo!” She flung the paper to the side like a frisbee.

“I—I think we’re going to have to leave.” said Maybelle, unable to go on.

“Hah! That’s what she *said* you’d do!” Bettina sang with evil glee.

“Who?”

“That bitch who wheeled me out here! Ha ha! She thinks she’s going to live forever. What a cunt!” Then she stopped, and leveled her eyes at Maybelle. “Just. Like. You!” She spat—a wretched, meaty goober-missile that landed on Maybelle’s forehead with a splat. Sister Mary Cephas picked this exact moment to look in on us.

“How are we doing? Is everybody—Rosie! What are you doing here?” She was confused, then stern. “You know you’re not supposed to be out of bed! How did you get here?” Rosie looked desperately at her, powerless to rein in her runaway mouth.

“That Muffincunt shoved her out here, you snooty old cooze!” Bettina was working herself up. “Whadja think, Christ gave her a ride on his bicycle—”

POW! Sister Mary Cephas, the picture of calm, hauled off and let Bettina have a smack that sent her wheelchair back five feet. If anything, this made her laugh even harder. The good sister turned to address us.

“I’m . . . sorry. I think everyone needs a rest. There’s been some sort of mix-up.” She glanced over at Pidge and shook her behemoth wimple. “These . . . weren’t the peo-

ple you were supposed to be working with. Thank you so much for your efforts." Maybelle mopped her brow with the sleeve of her smock and collected her things. I followed suit. Sister Mary Cephas unlocked the door to the foyer to lead us out. Himillsy didn't move, held by the piteous, melancholic spell of Pidge—a raisin-clown left out in the rain, her colors running, her self dissolving.

"Please . . ." The tiny woman begged, so quiet, almost not there at all, ". . . buy me."

On the ride back, Himillsy was shaking. She tried to hide it, but her right hand's occasional trips from the stick shift to the turn signal and back were perilous. And naturally—during this, the one and only time we really needed Maybelle to fill the unbearable silence with her usual diarrhea of the mouth, something like "Whew! Well, that wasn't so bad, now was it?", she didn't. Not like her at all.

She didn't say anything.

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HEREWITH, WE PRESENT A
SHORT EXCERPT FROM

the

L E A R N E R S

THE BOOK AFTER 'THE CHEESE MONKEYS.'

BY CHIP KIDD.

to be published by

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OUR STORY: It is the summer of 1961, in New Haven, Connecticut. Happy, our narrator of the book you are presently holding, has graduated from State with a Bachelor of Art's degree (emphasis in Graphic Design). He has sought and found employment as a deputy lay-out artist at the small advertising firm of Spear, Rakoff and Ware (see page 194). In the following scene, on a Saturday afternoon jaunt to pick up some paint supplies at the Yale University Art Depot, he quite unexpectedly reunites with Himillsy Dodd, with whom he has not had any contact for three years . . .

“So, what you’re telling me is, you lost my rhinoceros head. Is that what you’re telling me?”

By the beginning of July things were going pretty well, so I guess it was inevitable: Himillsy Dodd chose then to come back into my life. In her own special way.

“You said importing it through you guys would be no problem. That’s a three-hundred dollar rhinoceros head, pal. They don’t grow on *trees*.”

Now, some of you might be wondering why I haven’t mentioned her before. There are many reasons, but for those who are unfamiliar—she takes over whenever she’s involved. Or, as she once put it (muttered in sotted distaste at a Phi Delt mixer back at

school): *"I am the corpse at every wedding, I am the bride at every funeral."* And this was to be no exception.

"Three centuries, buddy. Cough him up."

We'd met my freshman year at State. She was a junior. I was captivated. And she was too—at least that's what she led me to believe. Together we went through an art school bootcamp the likes of which neither of us expected, and we came out of it booted—me out of every preconception about art and design that I ever had, and she from sanity (and the school) altogether. Our parting was not an easy or coherent one, chiefly because of what I'd perceived, over the phone, to be her total nervous breakdown. Which I admit I played a part in, however unwittingly. For Himillsy living dangerously was the only way to live. And me, I'm practically a crossing guard. More than once I'd spoiled her fun, rescuing her from something she didn't want to be saved from. And who is ever forgiven for that? I was her unwanted conscience, the Jiminy Cricket to her Pinocchio, forever doing her good turns. For that alone I suppose she had every right to hate me.

Then nothing, no contact for the next three years. But she was never far from my thoughts, from the moment of our first meeting.

"What do you mean, 'We know where it is?' I know what that means: On Earth. Somewhere between here and the tiny Republic of Togo. *Jesus.*"

Here's what I did know, long before I ever came to Connecticut: Himillsy had grown up just twenty min-

utes away, in Guilford, and her family still lived there (they were listed). I'd mused that with any luck she might even be still living with them. And I had an eye on getting in touch once I got my feet on the ground, as it were. Once I got the nerve.

And now the nerve had gotten *me*.

"Enough of you. Where's your supervis—" She turned, and finally saw me, standing in the checkout line of the campus Art Depot, clutching six jars of fluorescent egg tempura to my chest on a summer Saturday afternoon. Neither of us could believe it. Our eyes met, vaporizing three years in three seconds. "Oh. My. God." Her face hadn't changed—Betty Boop meets cute with the Dragon Lady. Ditto her figure, size zero in a sleeveless linen cocktail dress the color of dried mustard. A tiara of Ray-bans perched over her forehead. Mascara applied with a trowel and a quivering hand.

"Uh—" I replied, a reflex.

"Since *when*," she started, staggering towards me, her eyes dark with horrified concern, "have you been painting with *fluorescent* colors?"

"Since *when*," I countered, leaving the queue, "Do you have a rhinoceros head?"

"I *don't* have it. Haven't you been paying attention? The simpletons in charge of this salvage sale have lost it." She clicked her tongue in disgust. "Can you imagine? It's the size of a large dwarf and weighs two hundred pounds. It's like losing the front end of a DeSoto."

The manager eased toward her, cautiously, "Ma'am,

I . . . I keep telling you, it's not lost. It's being held in Customs."

Oh, I thought, you poor man. You have no idea who or what you're dealing with.

"Customs? What, are they waiting for the *rest* of it to show up?"

"Miss Dodd," I said, calmly, "Science has shown us that the severed rhinoceros head is the breeding ground of choice for the notorious and deadly Tse-tse fly. One nostril alone could comfortably house an entire colony. Surely this would be of grave concern to our government."

The manager gaped at me, desperate with gratitude for any explanation, however untenable. "Yes! That's it exactly."

She shouldered her slate Chanel bag and smoothed her ebony Lulu-helmet of hair. "You were always like that," she sneered at me. "Always."

"What, right?"

"No. *Infuriating*." Her scowl melted into a sly grin and she made for the door, pausing to address the manager, "I'll be back in a week and that head better be here. Or I'll have yours." And, jerking *her* lovely head in my direction, out she went.

I hastily abandoned the paint jars to the nearest shelf and followed. As I did in the old days.

My whole body was smiling. Himillsy, you're here. You're really here.

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The proprietors of Pepe's Pizza on Wooster Street boldly claim that they, and only they, originated this most ubiquitous of delectations here in the United States, and more specifically, in New Haven. Which may or may not be true, but this much is indisputable: they are not open for lunch. Dinner only, the bastards.

So Himillsy suggested (proclaimed, actually) that we go to Modern Apizza (pronounce 'Abeetz'), their biggest rival in town for the crust crown. They start serving at noon.

"Besides, it's better," she said, gunning the engine of her Corvair, "The sauce has more tang. Everyone's afraid to say it." The 'But not me' went unsaid. It always did.

I was still in a kind of shock—were I to wake up in my bed the next second, Himillsy gone like a smoke ring, I would not have been surprised.

But there she sat, as real as three years ago when we used to cruise down College Avenue: head scarcely clearing the dashboard, lacquered ebony fingernails orbiting the stickshift, the world behind her racing past, ever trying to keep up.

God, Hims. If there's a word for how much I've missed you, it's not in my vocabulary.

"Stop staring at me. I'm not the Hottentot Venus."

"Sorry. It's just that—"

"And what happened to your neon paint? Lose your nerve?"

"I put it on hold. Something came up."

"Did it. And that would be . . ."

“The human equivalent.”

She chuckled dryly, pulled over onto State and into a spot across the street from the restaurant. After she turned the engine off, she hesitated, chortling: “*In* human, darling.”

She didn’t bother with the menu. “We’ll have a large red, light on the motz, quarters: sausage, mushroom, onions, pepperoni. Extra sauce. And two Rocks.”

We got the last booth before the rush. Dean Martin oozed “That’s Amóre” over the loudspeakers. The impasto paintings of the Ponte Vecchio and the Leaning Tower of Pisa were fifth-rate, but the perfume of broiled garlic and simmering San Marzano tomatoes wafting from the ovens was perfection. A waitress in a red-and-white checkered gingham number which matched the table cloths planted the beers in front of us.

Himiltsy shook out a Lucky Strike and returned her sunglasses to their upright position. “Did you ever think about brains?”

“What?”

“I’m in a brain phase. Brains are *just* amazing. I’m crazy for them. I’ve been making scads of brains, whole regiments, out of Plasticine.”

“Brains.”

“In all sizes. And colors.”

“Except fluorescent.”

“Especially NOT fluorescent.” She flicked open her

Reddy Kilowatt Zippo and sparked her cigarette. “Too much to bear. But you really ought to consider brains. Dangerously overlooked. You’re missing out, trust me.”

“How so?”

“Well, first of all,” She was really fired up now, a martinet on a mission: “did you know that we only use ten percent of our brains? It’s totally amazing. One. Tenth. The rest is pure mystery.”

We hadn’t seen each other for nearly a third of a decade. Why were we talking about *this*? “And just how was that proven, exactly?”

“Easily. Look at all of human history.”

“You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Why? Mankind sure hasn’t. We’re a bunch of lunkheads! I mean really, just look at the past ten years—styrofoam, McCarthy, Disneyland, the Korean War, Liberace, frozen spaghetti. Come *on*. I seriously doubt we use even ten percent, most of the time. It’s the geniuses that can tap into the rest—*that’s* what’s interesting. I’ve been doing brain exercises.”

“Have you now?”

“Don’t laugh. It’s very serious.”

Should I say it? “Actually . . . it’s bunk.”

It was as if I’d just spilled the beans on Santa Claus to a five year old. “What is?”

“The ten percent thing. We learned it in second year Psych. There’s still a lot they don’t know, for sure, but it’s a common misconception, since the turn of the century. When they were finally able to study it with any accuracy.”

She was not liking this. Not one bit.

Might as well continue. “See, the fact is that only ten percent of your brain cells are *neurons*, the key cells used in learning. And of those, only ten percent of your neurons can fire at any given time, or else your head would explode. When someone has a seizure, that’s what’s happening.”

I could practically see the steam shoot out of her ears. Instead, smoke issued in mighty plumes from her nose—she the dragging dragon.

“It’s not fair to be actually *informed* on the subject.” she hissed, crushing out her light for emphasis. “You have no manners.”

“Well I’m—”

“ANYway, brains are my thing right now and that’s that.” She threw back a healthy slug of brew. “I think they’re beautiful. I’ve changed the name of our cat to Bulbous Medulla. He’s having none of it, but tough titty, kitty.” Then: “Alright, smartyboots. So what are you doing here?”

“Having lunch, I hope.”

“Cretin.” She fired off two matches together from the side of a Modern’s tinderbox, lit up, inhaled. “To what does the God-forsaken necropolis of New Haven owe your divine intervention?”

“Can’t you guess? I got a job. At that advertising agency. Spear, Rakoff and Ware, on Trumbull Street.”

She propelled another cloud to the ceiling and waited for me to continue.

“Remember?” I said, “Jeez, that whole thing, back

at school, with Winter and the Wrigley's wrapper? I had to find out who designed it? Which led me to—"

"You got a *job?* *Here?*"

As if she hadn't understood a thing I just told her. Could she have forgotten? It wasn't that long ago, was it? "It's an advertising firm. Don't you remember?"

"As a matter of fact I don't." Another puff. "I can't remember the last time I puked, either."

So much for talking about the past. Here, in closer captivity, I could see that she had indeed aged. Worry lines began their slight yet unstoppable journey outward from her tired eyes. But it was more than just the years. Something about her was different. Something profound had happened to her. Not anything good.

"I never pegged you for the advertising type." She remarked, not a little condescendingly.

"Well, what type *did* you—"

"Careful," said the waitress, "It's hot."

The pie was presented in what appeared to be an aluminum cookie sheet, bubbling like lava. It was round, but sliced into small squares.

When I remarked on this, Himillsy explained: "I figured it out when I was little—they cut it this way so you'll eat more of it."

"And how does that work?"

"Geometry. It's like writing an epic novel in little one-page chapters. Much easier to digest. Insidious."

The only thing insidious about it was that I couldn't get enough of it. Hims didn't so much eat the pizza as inhale it, all the while grunting from the pain. "If it

doesn't burn off the roof of your mouth you're just not enjoying it."

I had to agree.

Not ten minutes later, with the pan picked clean, we ordered another round of suds.

"You settled here by yourself?" She asked.

"Yes."

"What, still haven't found the right girl?" It was more sinister accusation than question. Hims and I had never been romantic. Not even hinted at, though at the time I told myself I would have liked that. But not now, and she knew why. I think she always did. Which was why she was asking. Oh, Hims, there's not a scab you won't pick at, is there?

"Apparently not." I said curtly, answering both our questions. "And you, what have you been up to, besides brains? How's Garnett?" (Her boyfriend from college.)

She used the dying embers of her cigarette to inflame a fresh one. "Garnett? God, who knows, who *cares?*"

You did, at the time. "I don't if you don't."

"I don't."

"Right." I couldn't help myself—memories bubbled to the surface like hungry goldfish. "God, do you remember that crazy Christmas party you two gave that time? You got so loaded you—"

"No." Not as in 'I don't remember.' As in 'That's gone now.' The whites in her eyes: ice.

"Sorry." Subject change needed. "So what's all this

about a rhinoceros head?” Knowing her, plans to turn it into a kinetic sculpture were not out of the question.

“What?” She glared at me, accusing. “That’s personal.”

“Sorry.”

“Really, can’t a simple country girl purchase one little rhinoceros head without it becoming a federal case? Is that what we’re paying our taxes for? You can bet this never happened to Margaret Mead. Oh, you can bet *that*.”

Simple. If there is anything you definitely are not, Hims, my kaleidoscopic goddess, it’s simple.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Perpetually.”

“Liar.”

“Oh, wrong.” Tell her: “You have no idea. I listen to you all the time. I always did.” Admit it: “Do you know what I used to do? I used to build you in my head. So I could still talk to you. I still do.”

“What?” she asked, incredulous, “WHY on earth would you do that?”

“Because you left.”

Oh no. Wrong thing to say and the wrong way to say it. Wrong wrong wrong. Dammit. It was as if I’d belted her with a baseball bat. “Look, I’m sorry, I—”

“Don’t.” She turned to the window, lowered her sunglasses, fumbled with her cig. “Just. Don’t.”

The waitress brought fresh bottles and cleared the table.

A dreadful limbo. Himillsy took a sip, slowly

brought us out of it. “I went through . . . a rough patch. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you. And I wouldn’t anyway. Too boring. Too Zelda Fitzgerald.”

“But, you *are* through it.” I was half asking, half asserting.

“So they tell me?”

“They.”

“That’s . . . enough for now.” She said quietly, stubbing out the butt and waving for the check. “I’ve got this.” She laid down a ten-spot on the bill, grateful for the diversion, shoving it to the edge of the table. Another slug from the bottle. That taken care of, she suddenly brightened, changing moods like a new pair of culottes. “Hey, it’s a whole new world, now, right? It’s the 1960’s, for Chrissakes! For the first time in history there’s someone in the White House I’d actually like to blow.”

“You want to *blow* Jackie?”

Furious giggling. Fully herself again. “You’re *obscene*.” Standing, gathering her keys, “So, where are you hanging your hat? I’ll drop you.”

“What, no Skellar?” Back at school, especially on a Saturday afternoon, pizza would have been just the beginning—onto the Teke Sunset Luau, onto the Tri-Delt Try-more, onto Acacia’s Midnight Mixer, onto the Skellar, onto the floor.

“Not today, sport.”

“Oh. Cleaned up your act?”

“How dare you? My act was always *immaculate*. I was practically a nun.”

“None the *wiser*.”

“Bastard.”

I told her the address and cross street and in five minutes we slowed to a stop at my apartment house.

“Thanks for lunch. Can I—?” I didn’t want it to end. I wanted everything. I wanted her and Tip to meet. They would really get a kick out of each other. “It’s . . . been so great to see you, after all this time.”

She bristled, not comfortable.

“Can I see you again soon?”

A smirk. “Not if I see you first.”

“Really. I mean it.”

“I’m *teasing*.” She purred, putting it in first. “Give me a call next week. We’ll set something up.”

I got out of the car and leaned back into the window. “So . . .”

“So what?”

So much I wanted to say, how I’d missed her dreadfully, that that the idea we could be friends again jump-started my heart. But I couldn’t—she’d only make fun. Turn anything into a joke so you don’t have to face it. But that was okay. Because now I’d never have to miss her again. I was asking for it, I didn’t care, wanted it with greedy desperation: “So, if I’m not the advertising type, what type *did* you have me pegged for?”

She lowered her eyelids, considered it, then, “Oh, you know. The decorative, serif type.”

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Almost three weeks later, a Thursday afternoon. In the past 21 days I had tried to call Himillsy four times—the first two it was busy, the second two no one was home. Then things got really crazy at work. I'd meant to stay on it, set up a dinner date. I really had.

Ring ring.

“Art Department.”

“Hi dear.”

Mom. I didn't encourage it, but it was no secret she positively luxuriated in confirming, weekly, my gainful employment. What mother didn't, I supposed. And yes, I didn't entirely mind the confirmation myself. We ran through all the usual: When was I coming home it's been too long, Aunt Sophie is trying to run her life, Dad's working too hard, the car port needs reshingling, the Riordans next door got a new Ford when they hadn't even paid for the last one. And then.

“Honey,”

Oh. Something's wrong. A sad switch had been thrown in her. Anyone's guess: One of the dogs was sick. The Symphony Ladies had black-balled her. Something. “What. What is it.”

“That's such a shame about your friend, the girl.”

What? “Girl? What girl?”

“The one who sent you the present that time.” Present? What did she think she was saying? “From Connecticut. Remember that Christmas?” No. Himillsy? How could she be talking about Himillsy? “I'm pretty sure it's the same girl. The name is so memorable. Oh, hon, there was a story about it in your paper.”

My paper. The minute my parents heard that my first ad was running in the *Register*, mom got a subscription. Which I thought was a little excessive—local news far from their locality. But she read it compulsively, as if it would somehow tell her what was going on in my life. Good God, maybe it did. “Did you see it?” she asked again.

“Mom, see *what?*”

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(*to be continued*)

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