

THE HERMIT



a novel by

Ray Holland

THE HERMIT

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The reason for releasing these chapters is that I hope you'll read them and feel an urgent, compelling need to find out how it ends—so much that you'll be willing to buy a printed copy of the complete book. For info on how to purchase, visit www.greatbigdog.com.

Contact the Author

You can contact the author at rayhollandbooks@gmail.com with comments, suggestions, questions, or whatever. I can't promise to reply to all email, but I'll read everything.

—RH

This novel is dedicated to the hermit and the mayor's daughter within each of us.

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PART ONE: THE MAYOR'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER ONE

Way far away from wherever it is that you happen to be, a hermit lived in a homemade shack on a mountainside.

This hermit lived in the usual hermit fashion, very simple and close to the earth. He grew vegetables in a little garden beside his shack and sometimes trapped small animals like rabbits. "Oh, boy," he'd say when he trapped a small animal like a rabbit. "I'm going to have meat tonight."

Meat.

In the winter, he kept a nice little fire burning in his homemade fireplace, and outside he wore a coat he had made out of the furs of animals he had trapped. Just between you and me, I think the coat looked hideous. But really—who was going to see it?

He'd brought a few things with him when he started living on the mountainside. He had some books he read for intellectual fulfillment—or for entertainment. Or both. He also had some notebooks and pens, so he could keep a journal of his spiritual journey of prayer and meditation. He wrote about things that happened to him, although living by himself on a mountainside in a forest, very little actually happened. It

was an exciting day when he saw a cloud shaped like Woody Allen.

It was something to write about. He tried to imagine which movie it was from, and decided it resembled Woody's character in *Manhattan*, looking the way Woody looks when he's standing there in that final scene talking to Mariel Hemingway. It happened three days in a row. Not the same cloud, because the clouds blew away each day. They were three different clouds, all shaped like Woody Allen in *Manhattan*. It was amazing. Another day would have been too much to bear. Fortunately the weather turned rainy, so the clouds weren't really shaped like much of anything on the fourth day.

"Dear journal," the hermit wrote, "it rained today, saving me from being overwhelmed by Woody." No one else would have understood that sentence. It's probably a good thing that no one else was around to read it.

Of course, our hermit had already been a hermit for a long time before Woody Allen ever made any movies. The *Manhattan* cloud story was just an example of the kind of thing that might happen to him.

Okay, so, let's see. We have the garden, trapping animals, meditating and praying, keeping the journal. That's about it.

The hermit lived on the mountain for many years, doing his hermitstuff and mostly being content with his life. He had no problems with door-to-door salesmen because no one knew he was there, and he had no problems with telemarketers because he didn't have a phone. Who was he going to call when he didn't want to be around people anyway?

Eventually (about three or four years before our story takes place), some folks came along and built a little village at

the foot of the mountain. It was a nice place for a village because it was near a river, and the ground was fertile, and so on and so forth. They didn't build the village just to irritate the hermit, but that's the way it seemed to him. He had been there for years, just grooving along with the universe—and then, all of a sudden, here were these daggone people building a daggone village! Of all the thousands of square miles of empty territory to choose, they had to put their village right there under his nose, daggone it! Even around on the other side of the mountain would have been good enough, but no.

He was angry about it. Okay, so they didn't know he was there. But still...

There was the noise of the hammers and nails, and the trucks bringing in the building materials, and whatnot.

Heavy on the whatnot. And the construction workers hooting and hollering and whistling at the pretty girls who walked by were a big distraction, too.

All that noise interfered with the hermit as he tried to do the stuff he was trying to do. He had been used to peace and quiet for many, many years, and now this.

He tried concentrating harder, but it didn't work. He tried stuffing leaves in his ears, but that just felt icky. After a couple weeks, he started getting used to it. As time went on, first one building and then another was finished, and the noise gradually died down.

Then, one day, the rumbling and roaring and hooting and hollering and whatnot was gone. The hermit found himself looking at a complete, brand-new, shiny, mint-condition village down at the foot of his mountain.

He didn't care for having a village so close, but what could he do? It wasn't going to move, and he wasn't going to move. He could deal with it.

In spite of himself, he even enjoyed it just a little bit when The Exploding Sperm Whales played an outdoor concert one night. Besides that, he couldn't actually see the village from his shack. Lots and lots of forest was sitting in between.

Now, it just so happens that down in this village, there was a certain young lady, the mayor's daughter. She was 21 years old and very pretty, about five-five with shapely legs and a cute little button nose and long, wavy, black hair. That's how I picture her, anyway. If you want to picture her differently, go right ahead. The main thing is that she was pretty. The details don't matter.

The mayor's daughter was mostly a pretty good mayor's daughter. She had gotten good grades in school and was now working at the local animal shelter. She volunteered at the soup kitchen, helping feed folks who were down on their luck.

You would have been proud to have her as a daughter.

Except, as you may have noticed, she was "mostly" a good daughter, and that means there was a problem. And the problem was that she... uh, well... Let's just say she enjoyed the society of gentlemen a little more than most folks thought she should.

You can interpret that any way you want. Let me say, though, that as far as I can tell, there's only one way to interpret it. I know what I would think.

She didn't waste any time. The first day the local tavern was open, she was right in there, cruising for trouble. ("Cruis-

ing for trouble." That's a nice little phrase. I like it; do you? I'm going to look for another place to use it in this story.)

Anyway, the mayor's daughter walked into the tavern. She had her hair done up all fancy-like, and she was dressed in her most flattering outfit. She looked around, surveying the territory, checking out the guys. It didn't take her long to check out the guys because she was the first person there. She knew they would show up, though, and she would be ready. There was the bartender, of course, but she wanted to hold him in reserve. He would always be there.

She ordered a drink, a Howlatthemoon, all one word. It was the specialty of the house, inasmuch as a tavern can be said to have a specialty when it's served just one drink in its entire existence. It was nice and fruity.

The mayor's daughter sat down on a stool to sip on her drink. She gave the bartender a thumbs-up to tell him she liked the drink. He smiled at her. He was thinking nasty thoughts. He wanted to do all kinds of X-rated things to her. He wanted to commit unspeakable sexual atrocities and perversions upon her body.

But it would be unprofessional to tell her so.

The evening went on, and people came in.

The place was hoppin'. The juke box was playing, and guys were shooting pool, and the mayor's daughter was deciding. She decided on a rugged-looking young fella who was in the corner playing darts. Thwap. Thwap. Thwap. She ambled over, watching the game, sipping her drink, and sat down at a nearby table.

After the guy she liked finished his turn, she clapped. "That was very good," she said.

"Well, I do my best," the guy said.

"I'm sure you do."

And before he knew it, the guy was ensconced in a booth with the mayor's daughter, over on the other side of the room away from his friends. The two of them were talking and laughing. Her hand found its way onto his knee.

"Let's go someplace private," the mayor's daughter said.

"Where to you want to go?"

"Use your imagination."

Okay, so the guy wasn't too bright, but the mayor's daughter wasn't concerned. She didn't care about discussing nuclear physics or the finer points of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. She needed him to know only one thing, and if he didn't know it already, he didn't have to be a genius to be able to learn it.

They went to his place. He had a swingin' bachelor pad a few blocks away. Well, it wasn't really anything like what you'd think of if someone asked you to picture what a swingin' bachelor pad is like. It was more like a room with some furniture in it. Now, of course, a swingin' bachelor pad is a room with some furniture in it, but you would describe it in much greater detail. You would talk about the revolving bed, the mirror on the ceiling, the 360-degree sound system, the well-stocked wet bar, and so on. Talking about this guy's place, about the only thing you can say is a room with some furniture in it.

It was good enough, though, to be a place where the mayor's daughter could commit unspeakable sexual atrocities and perversions upon this guy's body.

The neighbors complained about the noise. They complained about the banging and thumping and moaning and groaning and shouting and the electric motor sounds. What

they didn't see, afterward, was the clothing strewn about the place, the furniture knocked over, the assortment of interestingly modified small kitchen appliances, medical devices and power tools, the food stains on the floor, the collection of specialized literature, and a number of other things I would be embarrassed to talk about.

The mayor's daughter made the most of her opportunities.

The guy couldn't go to work for the next two days. When he finally showed up, they had to put him on light duty for a couple weeks. He'd had a good time. He would have done it again, but not very soon. In the meantime he had a good story to tell.

And word got around.

Word didn't get to the hermit because he didn't talk to anyone. It did, however, get to the mayor. One of his assistants came into his office a few days later. "Sir, I hate to bring this up, but I think you'll want to know about it."

"What?"

"Well, uh... " The assistant was very reluctant to say it. How do you tell a guy his daughter has engaged in scandalous behavior so excessive and shocking that no more than three times since the close of the Middle Ages has anything like it happened on this plane of existence?

Also, this assistant had heard stories of crazed dictators who pulled out handguns and shot guys who brought them bad news. He didn't think it was likely the mayor would do something like that. Still, the idea was sort of knocking around in the back of his mind being worrisome.

"Well, uh... "

"Come on, out with it."

"There's a rumor going around about your daughter, sir."

"Yes?"

"It's not a good one."

"It's not?"

"No, sir. I'd go so far as to say it's bad."

"Well, tell me."

"Remember, sir, this is just a rumor. We don't have any evidence to prove it."

"I'll remember. Now tell me."

"Okay, sir, it's like this. There's an unsubstantiated rumor that your daughter met a certain young man at the tavern the other night... " And the assistant proceeded to tell the mayor all the sordid details. He told him about the noise, the modified appliances, everything. He didn't hold anything back.

And at the end of the story the assistant stopped. He waited for the gun to come out. It didn't.

"Is that all?" the mayor asked.

"It's as much as we know."

The mayor nodded. He sat there a moment, behind his desk, being the mayor, thinking about this awful story. He got up, strolled calmly over to a suit of armor that was standing in the corner as an ornamental thing. (Or maybe it wasn't just ornamental; one never knows when one might need a suit of armor. His daughter could have made good use of it with that guy she met.) And the mayor punched the suit of armor. It went clattering down, falling apart, making a huge racket.

The mayor's secretary opened the door. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," the mayor said. "I, uh, I was just cleaning this suit of armor and it went off."

"Yes, sir." She stood in the doorway, doing her best to look as if she were waiting for something, but actually trying to figure out what was going on. She knew the mayor's excuse was bogus; the suit of armor wasn't loaded.

"You can go now," the mayor said.

She stood atill.

"Really, you can."

She left.

The secretary was out of the room, but the problem was still right in front of the mayor. His daughter was misbehaving.

He—the mayor, that is—wished his wife were still with him. She had died a couple years earlier in a freak accident involving a thimble, a bag of croutons and a backhoe from a construction site. A pair of tweezers might also have been involved. No one was ever able to figure out exactly what happened. The mayor—of course, he wasn't the mayor at that time—fell under a dark cloud of suspicion, but no one could prove anything. They couldn't prove anything because he had nothing to do with the accident. But they could still suspect him, and they did. That's largely why he came to live in this brand-new village at the foot of the mountain.

So the mayor wished his wife were still around. She would know how to deal with this problem. In fact, he was pretty sure that if she were still around, their daughter would never have engaged in such disgraceful behavior. She needed the guidance of a mother.

If only—the mayor thought—if only he were one of those crazed dictators who gunned down guys who told him stuff he didn't want to hear, and have other guys drag the body out

and dispose of it somewhere (who cares where?) so he could go on his merry way and pretend there's no problem.

He only thought that momentarily. He didn't really want to shoot anyone. He just thought it would be cool if, like, he could achieve the status of having shot someone without going through the unpleasantness of actually doing it. Or something. What was important was that the mayor knew he had to do something about the news his assistant had just told him. If not that, at least he had to appear to do something.

But what?

He'd figure it out. Maybe he could find a call-in radio talk show and ask about it. No, that wouldn't do. He didn't want to make it any more public than it already was. He would just read a book or look it up on a web site or *somesuch*.

Later.

Right now, he had to have lunch. He buzzed the intercom to call his secretary. "I'd like you to order me some unicorn stew from Dewey's Diner."

"Sir, I don't think they have unicorn stew."

"Well, ask if they have it. If not, just get me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

CHAPTER TWO

The mayor tried to think about his problem. He wanted to, for real. Or he wanted to want to. What he did was spend the rest of the afternoon playing Universal Federation Wrestling on his Super Mega Game Console. He was pretty good at it. He played a character called The Lugubrious Barney and worked his way up to a championship match, which he lost. But he'd be back. Oh, you better believe it.

When you're the mayor of a village as small as this one, you have a lot of free time.

That night, the mayor sat down to dinner with his daughter. "How's it going?" he asked.

"Okay," she said.

"How... uh, how's your social life?"

"Okay."

"This sure is good lasagna."

"Yes, it is."

And after dinner, the mayor's daughter got the urge to socialize again. "I'm going out, daddy," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to visit some friends."

"Have fun."

"I will."

She went to the tavern, sat down at the bar, and ordered another Howlatthemoon. The bartender made the drink, and because he had heard the story about her and the guy she had picked up—who hadn't?—he put a little extra vermouth in, just to show his appreciation. He didn't know what her intentions were, whether she just maybe wanted to sit and have a drink and relax, or if she was supposed to meet the same guy, or if she was on the prowl for another guy, or what. Of course, she still had her eye on the bartender, but remember, she was keeping him in reserve. So she sat there watching guys coming in and drinking and socializing with their friends and going back out.

A good number of people had heard the story about that first guy, or to put it more accurately, a good number of people had heard some version of the rumor. A few people were walking around town believing the apartment building had burned down as a result of her sexual excesses, and the residents were lucky to escape with their lives. One guy had even been told, although he wasn't sure whether to believe it or not, that a portal to another universe had opened up in the closet of that guy's apartment and a number of strange and exotic creatures had joined in the merrymaking. (Just to make sure it's clear, there was no portal of any kind.)

Some of the guys in the tavern had heard various forms of the story, and they did whatever they thought would catch the mayor's daughter's attention. They smiled at her, they looked at her with smouldering, seductive gazes, they sent

her drinks. Some tried to look cute. Some puffed their chests out trying to look studly. One guy went to the men's room and stuffed wads of toilet paper down the front of his pants. He came back out with a lumpy, unsightly bulge that made him look deformed. A lot of the guys who hadn't heard any version of the story were also trying to get her attention simply because she was an attractive young lady.

The mayor's daughter talked to a few of them, just a little bit of harmless chit-chat. Then she made up her mind and decided which guy she wanted.

They went back to his place and created a new rumor. Again there was excessive noise, bumping, thumping, and so on. The building shook. Body fluids were flung about the room with gleeful abandon. There were utensils, appliances, modified power tools, blow-up dolls, chanting, costumes, intense heat radiating from an unknown source.

The guy ended up happy. The mayor's daughter ended up happy.

She snuck home early the next morning before the mayor got up, and she went to bed.

A couple days later, the mayor's daughter was doing her volunteer work at the soup kitchen, side-by-side with her best friend. The new story, about her adventures with the second guy, was making its rounds around town. Some of the down-on-their-luck men were leering at her. Some of the down-on-their-luck women were giving her cold, disapproving looks. A few of the down-on-their-luck people were whispering to other down-on-their-luck people and pointing at her.

If you had been standing close to some of these whisperings, you might have heard words and phrases like "farm-

fresh produce," "wading pool full of chocolate pudding," "secret cache of uranium 235," and so on. Once again, the story had gotten exaggerated as it circulated. And it's easier to exaggerate a story when no one knows what really happened. "Hey, man, you know what? The guy who operates the drill press down to the fabrication plant, he said they were doing something with six dozen pairs of football shoulder pads. Those real bulky kind, like the linemen wear."

Who can say any different?

And just in case you're wondering, the guys she had played with weren't doing anything to deny anything or tone down the rumors. Of course, the true stories of those adventures, just plain and unadorned, would have been wild and excessive enough to immortalize those guys forever as heroes in the annals of the sexual exploits of the village guys, but you know how young men are. If you don't, trust me: That's how they are. Some of them.

But letting the stories run with unchallenged exaggeration didn't hurt anything, as far as they were concerned. In fact, it lent the stories an air of being legendary.

What young man wouldn't love to be renowned as a sexual legend? Even the hermit (Remember the hermit? We'll get back to him.), in his days as a strong, young man, might have relished such a reputation. Even now, fifty years a hermit, he would enjoy thinking, if he had some reason to think so, that a group of old men might be sitting around somewhere talking about sexual exploits of their younger days, and they might recount stories of that one guy... who was he? He hasn't been seen around town for fifty years; rumor has it he became a hermit or something, but no one's sure... But oh, my gosh,

the stories about that guy... Folk ballads had been written about him...

But that's neither here nor there. Right now we're still at the soup kitchen, with the mayor's daughter and her best friend serving up dinner to the down-on-their-luck folks, and some of the down-on-their-luck folks spreading rumors about her.

The mayor's daughter knew what they were doing. She wasn't stupid; she knew exactly what was going on. Now, she would have to allow as how this wasn't the most pleasant thing that could happen in front of her. On the other hand, she didn't let it bother her too much. She was very self-assured. She was, by golly, going to live life on her own terms, and if other people couldn't mind their own business, or if they didn't like what she was doing, well, that was their problem. They could just go bite a big one.

"You know what these people are talking about, don't you?" the mayor's daughter's friend asked.

"I have a pretty good idea."

"You don't care?"

"It would be silly to worry about it, wouldn't it?"

The friend stopped serving for a moment and looked at the mayor's daughter. She wasn't sure what to say. "You mean you don't care?"

"Do you think I should stop doing what I want to do because someone else doesn't approve? I'm not hurting anyone."

"You tell'em, young lady," said the old man waiting to be served.

The mayor's daughter glanced at him. He leered at her. "I would turn you inside-out," she said.

He kept on leering.

"Literally," she said.

He kept on leering.

"I'm using the word 'literally' correctly," she said. "Not in the incorrect sense that most people use it, when they just want to emphasize their point. I'm saying I would turn you inside-out, not as a metaphor for some sort of strenuous activity, but literally. You would end up with your guts on the outside of your body. The rest of your life would be a waking nightmare. The only saving grace would be that you couldn't live very long that way."

He digested that bit of info and the leer faded. He took his tray and moved on.

"I'm just saying," the friend said, "you have to live among these people. That means you have to compromise somewhere to get along with them. We all do."

"Okay, my compromise is that I don't care if they talk about me. So what?"

Meanwhile, the new story was reaching the mayor. His assistant came into his office, all nervous-like and such. He clearly didn't want to do this. He didn't want to be there at all. He wished, devoutly, that he could at that moment be working as a roadie on a Neil Diamond tour. Not only would he not have to break bad news to his boss, but he could see interesting places like New York and Germany and Las Vegas and... well, lots of places.

But he was here. "Sir?" the assistant said, timidly.

The mayor put his Interstellar Football Association computer game on pause. Various alien life forms wearing bulky body armor were frozen in an interesting tableau of running

and blocking and arm waving and eye gouging. "Yes, what is it?"

"Uh, well, sir, it's like this. I, uh... well... "

"Is this another rumor about my daughter?"

"I'm afraid it is."

They mayor blinked and sighed. "Same guy or a different one?"

"Different."

"More lurid, less, or the same?"

"More, sir. It would seem she's stepping up her game."

"Stepping up her game? What the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm just here to tell you the bad news."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"Are you sure? I know it's not pleasant, but maybe you need to know what people are saying."

The mayor sighed. He had a third and five on his own thirty-three yard line, down six points. "All I need to know is that there's a rumor going around," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Whether he *needed* to know the details or not, he didn't *want* to hear them.

And other people who didn't want to hear about it were the leaders of the mayor's political party. At party headquarters, the chairman of the party was busy being disgusted. "I don't like hearing this," he said. "It's bad."

"Yes, it is," his secretary said.

"This is already well on the way to becoming a major scandal," the chairman said. "It's clear that she's going to make a habit of this, and it's only going to get worse and worse. This is the sort of thing that loses elections."

"But the mayor has only been in office a few weeks. The election's a long way off."

That was true, but it didn't make the situation any the less serious. Here's what the chairman was thinking: He was thinking that this situation could go in one of two directions. The bad direction was that if the mayor's daughter was allowed to continue what she was doing, by the time the election came the opposition could point to four years of wild, disgraceful behavior and the mayor's inability to make her behave.

The good direction would be to somehow make her stop, and soon. Then, when the election came around they could pretend it never happened. If the opposition said anything about it, the mayor could say, "Yeah, we had this little problem early in my first term, but I dealt with it and everything's been peachy keen since then." Yeah, that would make him sound like a man who could get things done.

"Well, I'm sure the young men of the town could easily be persuaded to vote for the mayor again," the secretary said.

"That's not going to be enough. No, we have to take action. Let's see... what's the first thing we need to do?"

"Tell the mayor to make his daughter behave?"

"No, that's the second thing. The first thing is to hire a public relations company to spin this thing."

"I don't think there are any public relations firms in town, sir," the secretary said.

"Then get me an appointment with one of those fancy New York firms and book me a flight. Tell them this is an emergency. We don't have a minute to spare."

The party chairman flew to New York that night and was able to meet with one of the partners of the fancy PR firm the next morning. The firm had been booked up for months in advance—that was how the chairman's secretary knew they were good—but the secretary told them there was a secret cache of uranium 235 in the village, and if they didn't win the next election it would fall into the hands of nefarious evildoers. And so one of the partners in the firm cleared out his schedule for the next day so he could meet with the party chairman.

That secretary, she was really on the ball.

The chairman and the partner met in the conference room at the firm's headquarters. Ordinarily the partner would meet with clients in his office, or in the client's office, but this was a matter of such grave concern that it couldn't be discussed anywhere but the conference room. It was a big place, with a long table and a big window at one end of the room and a movie screen at the other end. The movie screen was supposed to be for business-related presentations and such, but mostly they used it to watch Bugs Bunny cartoons.

The chairman and the partner sat at opposite ends of the table, so as to feel they were making the fullest use of the facilities, but it quickly became apparent that they were too far apart. So they just went up to the partner's office.

The chairman told the partner his story, all about the mayor's daughter and the guys and the modified power tools and the costumes and explosions and robots (I hadn't mentioned the robots, had I?) and whatnot, and the stories going around town and the people—most of them, that is—disapproving of her behavior.

"We plan to get the girl to stop all this fooling around," the chairman said. "But we also need some way to spin all this so it doesn't look so bad."

The partner nodded. "Of course," he said. "Of course. Let us work on it for a while and see what we can come up with. I'll let you know."

Meanwhile, another party official was meeting with the mayor. "You have to control your daughter," the official said.

"I know."

"You have to make her stop this promiscuous behavior."

"I will."

"Do you have any idea how you can do that?"

"No, I don't." Hey, at least he was honest.

"Can you explain things to her and make her understand the error of her ways? Will you have to threaten her? What will it take?"

Well, the mayor would rather explain than threaten. "I'll explain it to her," he said. He tried to sound confident.

"Good. I'm glad we had this little talk."

"So am I."

And in New York, the PR people were brainstorming. In the conference room.

"I think we should say she was possessed by evil spirits."

"I think we should say she was kidnapped and replaced by a lookalike."

"It was someone else, a case of mistaken identity."

"It was really a robot."

"Keep the ideas coming," the partner said.

A couple days later, the mayor's daughter dragged another lucky guy off to commit excessive sexual atrocities, which made the mayor realize the urgency of talking to her. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of anything that would be good to tell her, that he thought would be effective. So he just decided to improvise. "Daughter, come here," he said authoritatively when she came home from her job at the animal shelter.

"Yes, daddy?"

"It, ah... ahem... has come to my attention that you've been misbehaving with boys."

"Well, daddy, that depends on your definition of misbehaving."

"When you're the father of an attractive young lady," the mayor said, "you generally have a pretty strict definition of what misbehaving means."

"Okay."

"I've heard stories."

"I think they've been exaggerated."

"Well, now, that makes it even worse than it really is, doesn't it?"

"I don't see how, daddy. It doesn't mean I did stuff I didn't really do."

The mayor wasn't expecting that. He didn't even understand it. So he plowed forward. "The point is," he said, "that you've been doing things you shouldn't be doing. You have to stop."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you shouldn't be doing those things."

"What's wrong with it?" she asked. "I'm not hurting anyone."

"Well, you see, that's where you and I disagree. Maybe you're getting a momentary thrill, but in the long run it's meaningless." It was a real stretch for him to use a word like "momentary."

"It doesn't have to be meaningful," she said.

"Then there's another thing. People are talking."

"So what? I don't care."

"That's okay, except that me being in my position, as mayor of the village, it's a political problem."

"Why? You're not doing anything they disapprove of."

"But I'm not stopping you from doing stuff they disapprove of. When the next election comes, that looks bad for me."

"But daddy, the next election is a long way away."

"If you don't stop all this fooling around, then by the time the next election comes people will see you've been misbehaving for almost four years."

"Okay, but I just have to be me. I'm trying to have some fun, daddy. Take advantage of my youth."

"Can't you take advantage of your youth by, oh, I don't know, maybe going to the movies or something?"

"I can go to the movies after I get old."

"Then join a women's basketball team."

"Daddeee... "

"I'm just saying, daughter, that other girls are perfectly happy behaving themselves, not doing all sorts of promiscuous stuff. Why not you?"

"Well, gosh, everybody can't be the same."

"Just try, okay? Just try. If I don't get reelected, then I'm out of a job. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"There are lots of other things you can do. You could become a hair stylist or a flute teacher."

"I hate to admit this, but I can't do anything else. I'm totally incompetent. If I can't be the mayor, I have no idea what I could do."

Now, don't get the wrong idea. It might sound as if the mayor's daughter didn't care about her daddy's predicament, but that wasn't the case. She understood and she sympathized. But she just didn't have it in her to change her ways. She wanted to sample everything life had to offer in that particular area. She didn't want to promise something she didn't think she could do.

And yet, she sat there looking at him, and he was so upset, so distraught. It broke her heart to see him that way. Well, maybe it didn't actually break her heart, but it gave her unpleasant little twinges, to be sure. Also, this conversation had already gone on far too long for her liking, and she was pretty sure she wasn't going to get out of it until she told him something he wanted to hear. "I'll try, daddy," she finally said, hoping it would be good enough. "I'll try to behave myself."

"You need to do more than try," he said.

"Daddy, you have to understand, I can't change just like, like..." she snapped her fingers, "...that."

"Yes, of course. That would be too much to expect. But you'll try, won't you?"

"I promise." She kinda sorta wanted to promise to try—for him. As far as a *real* try, her heart wasn't in it. She just hoped she sounded sincere.

The mayor let himself be convinced. If he had been able to look at the scene objectively, to coolly evaluate what was going on, he would have figured it out. How could he not? As it was, he didn't want to think about it too much because that would be, like, all uncomfortable, and stuff. He had that nagging little doubt in the back of his mind, but it was easy to ignore.

And in New York, at the big fancy PR firm, the brainstorming was still going on.

"We can say it's a case of mistaken identity."

"Maybe we can say she was just studying with them."

"That's a dumb idea."

"Now, guys, remember, when you're brainstorming there's no such thing as a dumb idea."

"Maybe not, but when we're finished brainstorming, it'll become dumb."

"Your mama's dumb."

"If you can't be any more creative than that, you shouldn't be working here."

"Oh, go to heck, poopie-pants."

As the next couple weeks passed, the owner of the tavern noticed something. He noticed that business from the young men of the village would steadily go up for a few days until the mayor's daughter came in to find a playmate. The next day business dropped sharply, but would then gradually build up again. It was a regular thing.

Meanwhile, the hermit was going about his ordinary hermitlife. His ultimate spiritual goal was to reach, by means

of meditation and contemplation, the High Plane of Astral Everythingness, where One is in Harmony with The All and The All is in Harmony with One, and Everything is Indistinguishable from Everything Else.

He had made a lot of progress over the years. All in all, the journey would consist of 143 steps. He had breezed through the first seven steps quickly and easily. It seemed so easy that he was actually a bit disappointed. He'd gotten that far and didn't feel he had actually accomplished anything.

But after that, it became more challenging. It was more complex.

Steps eight through thirty-four were tougher, and they had indeed left him with some sort of feeling of accomplishment. Step thirty, the State of Sensible Beingness, was particularly fun, as it involved playing Chinese Checkers with puppies.

He felt he was making progress—not just in terms of the number of steps he had achieved, but in learning profound and true things about the universe and his place within it. For example, he had learned that Chihuahua puppies were cutthroat Chinese Checker players, but Dobermans weren't very good at all.

He stopped for a couple weeks and rested at number thirty-four. That one, by the way, was called The Supreme Meaning of Ethereal Condensation. He liked it there. It was a nice place to hang out for a while, very pleasant. The humidity was just right.

But he had to move onward. He worked his way upward, through more steps, some easy, some difficult, stopping a couple more times to rest his spiritual muscles and then moving on.

At the time our story takes place, the hermit had just finished step 135. Yes, he was that close—*that close*—to reaching the final step of enlightenment. He had only eight steps to go. Yes, he was in the single digits, Daddy-O. Single digits. He was coasting home.

Step 135 had been the most difficult of all. Oh, my gosh. It was the Preying Bird of Eternal Midnight, and it was aptly named. It was very dark—not so dark that you'd open your eyes and see nothing but blackness, but very shadowy, with a disconcerting lack of color and detail. It had a slight chill; the equivalent in the physical world would be weather that's just cold enough to make you think about putting on a sweater before leaving the house, and there would be a slight breeze, just strong enough to make you feel the discomfort is being insistent.

He was there for almost a year, at the Preying Bird of Eternal Midnight. He was stuck. At first he relished the challenge. Then he became tired, then worried that he wouldn't make it through. Then he panicked and floundered about for a while. Then he decided to stop. He just gave up. Step 135 was pretty far along; it was a lot farther than most people got, so maybe he should think of it as being good enough. He lingered there for two and a half months, not trying.

Just as a side note, I should make it clear that all this stuff about things that happen during the journey—the pup-pies and the constant darkness, and whatnot—all that is just stuff that the seeker (in this case the hermit) experiences during meditation sessions. When he's not meditating, in normal everyday life, things are just as you would expect them to be for a guy who has been living all alone for decades with no television set.

Anyway, the hermit was having problems at the Preying Bird of Eternal Midnight. It was common knowledge, among hermits, that most found similar difficulties in their spiritual journey. Some had big problems in as many as six or eight steps along the way. Some remained at a bad step for ten years or more. Some even gave up and languished in hopeless despair for the rest of their lives at whatever step they happened to be stuck.

It was rare—extremely rare—for anyone to go through all the steps without facing the existential angst of at least one level that seemed impossible.

The folks at hermit school even taught the students about this in the first semester. They wanted to make sure the students understood how it could be, in case they wanted to back out before devoting too much time to the hermit career path. Very few backed out, though. Like having kids, it was the sort of thing you don't truly understand until it happens.

The problems, and the steps at which those problems appeared, varied considerably. Other hermits breezed through the Preying Bird of Eternal Midnight in as little as fifteen minutes. On the other hand, our hermit had found step seventy-six, *The Rising Form of Actuality*, to be his easiest. He had breezed through it while eating lunch one day. Yet no fewer than a dozen other hermits were stuck there indefinitely.

So he wasn't the only one to face the problem of a step that seemed impossible. It was common. But that didn't help him get through it. He was all by himself, which is the main point to becoming a hermit.

And so he sat, all alone, with no clue as to how he was going to make any further progress.

Yet the atmosphere—the spiritual atmosphere—at that step was, as we've already seen, too oppressive to remain there indefinitely. And what made it worse was that this was the period when they were building the village at the foot of the mountain.

The hermit gathered his wits and evaluated his position as best he could. To lift himself out of the depths of the Preying Bird of Eternal Midnight would require dedication, devotion and discipline. This was serious business.

He meditated and wrote in his journal. He read. He fasted. He exercised. He went on incredible, internal journeys. He figured out how to play *The William Tell Overture* by cracking his knuckles.

He was not going to fail.

And along about the time the final building of the brand-spanking-new, mint-condition village was completed—in fact, on the very day the mayor took the oath of office—the hermit found his way out of the Preying Bird of Eternal Midnight. What he hadn't noticed, not in all that time he was stuck, was that a trap door was set in the floor just inside the entrance. One look down would have solved the whole thing.

He was now on the Bridge of Constant Focus. It was a much nicer place.

And yet, something was not quite right. As he stepped across the frontier from the Bird of Eternal Midnight to the Bridge of Constant Focus, he caught a glimpse, an oh-so-brief glimpse out of the corner of his eye, of a very pretty young lady off in the distance. She had shapely legs and a cute little button nose and long, wavy, black hair. At least he thought that's what she looked like. He hadn't gotten a good enough look to be sure.

The hermit turned and gazed off in the direction where he had seen her, but she wasn't there anymore. He had an urge to go chase her, to find her, to ask what she was doing there. She didn't belong in his spiritual journey.

But then, he thought, it didn't matter. She had seemed wholesome and not at all threatening. Besides that, she was gone now.

CHAPTER THREE

And in New York, the PR firm had decided on the best way to spin the scandal. They were going to accuse the guys who had been playing with the mayor's daughter of working with the opposing party. They, the PR people, were going to say that these rumors, these scandalous stories about the mayor's daughter's behavior, were all a great big stinky bunch of lies designed to discredit the mayor.

They even set up a "dummy" PR firm, a fake company that would take the fall. There would be evidence that the other New York PR firm (the dummy firm), working with the opposing party in the village, had manufactured the whole thing, the entire scandal, in their conference room.

The people of the village would eat it up. A first-rate political scandal that involves a conspiracy would easily trump a second-rate sex scandal that involves a girl who merely wants to have a good time.

The PR firm presented their idea to party officials, complete with charts and a multimedia presentation. The mayor and the chairman of the party agreed. Great idea, they said.

The campaign was to start with an anonymous tipster identifying himself as an intern at a fancy New York PR firm (the fake one) leaking an email to the village's television station. So word went out through the usual channels that the firm (the real one) needed writers for a special, top-secret project. Hundreds answered the call. They sent resumes and writing samples and so on and so forth. This was going to be a peach of a job, and the pay was daggone good.

It was highly competitive. The stakes were high, so none but the best would do for this job.

After reading and evaluating all the writing samples and interviewing the candidates, the PR firm finally hired the five best writers. The five writers were all going get the same assignment, and the PR firm was going to use the best work they submitted.

And while the writers were at work, the PR firm set up the fake, competing fancy New York PR firm as the place where the emails were supposed to come from. They rented an office in the basement of an abandoned warehouse somewhere in New York City. They installed a phone and set up a computer and hired a secretary-type to sit at a desk. If someone called, it would appear to be real—real and legitimate. If, however, someone showed up at the office to take a look, it would become pretty well clear that the whole thing was a put-on.

But they were sure that no one from the village would go to New York City. Hey, it gave the party chairman the heebie-jeebies when he went, but he couldn't see any way to avoid it.

Okay, so anyway, the writers turned in their work, and the big, fancy New York PR firm chose the best emails to use in their devious, evil plan.

The phone answerer in the basement fired up her computer and typed in the first message, addressing it to the TV station in the village.

One of the interns was the first to read it. "Holy smoke," he said breathlessly. "This is big."

The intern went to get his supervisor and showed him the email. "Holy smoke," the supervisor said. "You're right. This is big."

The supervisor went to get the head of his department. "Holy smoke," the department head said. "This is more than big. This is *really* big."

And so the email went up through the chain of command, through the manager and the department director and the administrator and the vice president and on up to the Head Guy In Charge of Everything.

They wasted no time. Well no more time, that is, other than the time it had already taken to show all these people this email that had come in. They held a meeting (in the conference room, no less) and decided it was big, a big scandal in the making, and that it should be the lead story on that night's show.

And so it was.

"We begin tonight with a political scandal in the making," the anchor said. "Earlier today an inside source forwarded an email to us outlining a plot to discredit the mayor."

On the screen, a graphic with the text of the email appeared:

Dear opposing party chairman,

You'll be pleased to know that our plans to discredit the mayor are almost complete. We've hired a staff of highly qualified writers to write stories about how the mayor's daughter is misbehaving. Even as I write this note, they're hard at work creating horrible, scandalous stories that'll amaze and astound you. These stories will thrill you and chill you; they'll make you laugh and cry. They'll make your heart stop beating, but not for long enough to kill you.

Tomorrow, we start auditioning guys to spread these stories around the village as rumors. We're going to screen them very carefully to make sure they're both immoral and amoral, and to make sure they'll relish playing a part in a deviously evil scheme such as this.

It won't be long before the mayor is forced out of office in disgrace. HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!!

It's a shame that the mayor's daughter will have her reputation ruined in this evil plot, because really she's such a nice, wholesome, virtuous (heavy on the virtuous) young lady, but POLITICS ARE POLITICS. If inno-

cent people are ground underfoot as we ruthlessly pursue our evil ends, so much the better. HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!!

"This plot is evil," the anchor said. "We'll follow up with more details of this shocking, evil story as we get them."

At party headquarters, the party chairman turned off the TV and sat back. "Very good," he said to the other party officials. "The plan is in motion. All we have to do now is hope the mayor's daughter can behave herself."

Yeah, well, you probably already know how that went, right?

Right.

The mayor's daughter was also watching the news on TV. She was sitting on the sofa with her best friend, unable to believe what she had just seen. "How could anyone tell such lies?"

"You mean you really haven't been playing around with those guys? You've really been wholesome and virtuous?"

"Oh, don't be stupid. I've done all that stuff. It's the news report that's a lie."

"But they couldn't put it on television if it weren't true!"

"They just did, best friend. They just did. Something funny's going on around here, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Why are you so upset about it? They're saying you're virtuous. If I were you, I'd just take it and let it drop."

The mayor's daughter didn't have a reply to that.

The mayor's daughter wasn't the only one who wanted to know what was going on. The chairman of the opposing party had seen the news story, and he was livid, livid with rage. He stalked around the house, stomping his feet, cursing and waving his arms. His face was red. Steam was shooting out of his ears. You may think I'm making up the steam just for comic effect, but steam was really shooting out of his ears. Don't ask me how. And if you happened to be there, you would think you were watching a cartoon.

He called all his fellow party officials, cronies, assistants, and so on. This was a bad story. A bad, bad story, and they had to do something about it.

This was an emergency.

They met at opposing party headquarters. One of the cronies had just happened, by coincidence, to tape the news show because they were running a story about the local elementary school and his child had been interviewed. "I wanna grow up to be just like my daddy," the kid had said.

Misguided though it is to want to grow up to be just like a political crony, it was a good thing the kid said it. The news reporter liked the quote so much—more for the way the kid said it than what he actually said—that she promised to make sure they'd use it on TV. So proud daddy taped the show. What parent wouldn't want to preserve a quote like that? And as a result he also got the emergency-inducing segment on tape as well.

Opposing party headquarters was equipped lavishly. They had an indoor swimming pool. They had a billiard room, a video arcade, a four-lane bowling alley, and a tea shop for some reason named after a character from a classic American novel. Pretty daggone nice. But no one was interested in any

of those things. What they were interested in was the state-of-the-art home theater system, where they could watch the offending news segment over and over.

Which is exactly what they did. Over and over, so much that everyone ended up memorizing it. They discussed it, analyzed it, asked one another questions and brainstormed ideas as to how such a thing could have been reported.

"We all know that this plot, if it's true, is nothing our party would ever, or could ever, condone. I mean, I think we all know that this is far too unethical even for us."

There was a general murmur of agreement among the fellow opposing party officials, assistants and cronies.

"But," the chairman continued, "what if someone took it upon himself to do this on his own? What if we have a loose cannon in our midst?"

There was a general murmur of surprise and shock among the fellow opposing party officials, assistants and cronies. Yes, it was possible, maybe, perhaps... but who wanted to think about something like that?

"We have to think about something like that," the chairman said. "It might not be true. I hope it's not true. But the fact is, right now we just don't know. These things have been known to happen."

More analysis, more brainstorming. The chairman finally adjourned the meeting at about three in the morning. But he kept his two most trusted advisors longer.

"You're the only two people I'm certain I can trust," he said. The advisors beamed in delight. In a dark room, you could have read a book in their glow.

"I want to hire a private investigator to see if someone in our party might have done this," the chairman said. "And if it wasn't an opposing party member, then who was it?"

The trusted advisors nodded wisely. They agreed that it was a good idea. They needed to know where that story had come from.

Who else was interested in that news report? You might think the young men of the village would be, but you would be wrong. Yeah, sure, they were interested to the extent that they talked about it amongst themselves a little bit, but not a whole lot. They'd say stuff like, "Did you see that news story about the rumors about the mayor's daughter?"

And the other guy would say something like, "Yeah, ain't that something?"

That was about as far as it went. Those who had actually played with the mayor's daughter knew something funny was afoot, that someone was obviously lying for some reason, but hey, that was politics. It was dirty business, much nastier than promiscuous sex could ever be.

But so what? They'd had their fun. And if she wanted, there was no reason not to go for more. If people were saying on the news that she was virtuous, then it would be easy for the guys to deny that they had ever misbehaved with her—if, for some reason, it might become necessary to deny something.

In the village, people were abuzz. As we already said, a first-rate political scandal that involves a conspiracy trumps a second-rate sex scandal that involves a girl who merely wants to have a good time. (For a first-rate sex scandal, you have to

have adultery and/or bigamy and/or the actual public figure him- or herself doing something he or she shouldn't. A single, unattached family member being a little too active doesn't cut it.)

This political scandal, as far as political scandals go, was fair-to-middlin', as they say. The public could see very clearly that there was some sort of power struggle going on behind the scenes. If the news report was true, then someone powerful had been lying to them. If it wasn't, then someone else who was powerful was lying to them. Either way, it was a field day for the cynics, and the uncertainty gave the paranoid-minded something to think about.

And the hermit? Well, he didn't know any of this was going on. He had no reason to care about it.

The mayor's daughter sat in her room, thinking. She sure was curious about that TV news report. Now, on the one hand, her best friend had a point when she had said that if they wanted to say she was virtuous, she should just let it go at that. Yeah, virtuous. If people believed it, what was the problem? That's what daddy wanted, anyway.

Hmmm... what daddy wanted.

Could he have had something to do with this?

It was certainly reasonable for her to entertain the idea, but of course he hadn't had anything at all to do with it. The chairman had kept the mayor out of the loop on purpose. If that fool knew it was actually a PR campaign, he'd do something to screw it up.

For sure.

The Hermit continued meditating at The Bridge of Constant Focus. His consciousness walked across the bridge, occasionally stopping to look over the railing so as to check out the view of the horizon (gorgeous, I might add, with the river winding away into the distance, looking as if it were flowing into the setting sun).

The Hermit didn't know where this bridge was. Well, it was on a spiritual plane; he knew that. But spiritual planes can be tricky places to nail down, and very often they're associated with some sort of physical space. This bridge might be modeled on a place in, say, Louisiana, or in Africa, or just about anywhere. He supposed that if he knew more about vegetation, what plants grew in what areas, he would have a better idea.

Ultimately, though, it didn't matter. If it did, he wouldn't be there. The idea was simply to get across the bridge.

Up ahead, he saw a brown paper bag on a dinner table that was placed in the middle of the bridge. He approached the table and looked inside the bag. Cookies. Lots of different types of cookies. Chocolate chip cookies, sugar cookies, Oreos, shortbread cookies, peanut butter cookies, oatmeal cookies, biscotti, a variety of Girl Scout Cookies (including his favorite kind, the chocolate mint, which of course he hadn't had since before he left civilization to become a hermit), even a few brownies and some pfeffernusse. And others. I just don't care to sit here and type out the names of a bunch more cookies, and I'm sure you don't care to sit there and read them. We'll just say there were a bunch more. Whatever your favorite is, some of them were in the bag.

Now, the hermit intuited that he shouldn't eat all the cookies. He was pretty sure this was a test. Who was adminis-

tering the test, he didn't know. It didn't matter. If it was there in front of him, it was there for a purpose. He knew he didn't have to actually eat anything in the meditative world, so the cookies must be metaphorical.

Yes, metaphorical cookies. But daggone, they sure looked good. He thought it might be a psychological test, like, say, you choose a cookie, and your choice indicates something about your personality. Maybe if he picked up an oatmeal cookie, it would show that he was wise beyond his years. And then again, it could be dangerous. If he picked, for example, a sugar cookie, someone might take it as an indication that he was mentally unbalanced.

He had to be careful which cookie he selected.

Or maybe he could select more than one? What if he took the whole bag? Maybe he'd need it.

Or maybe the test was simply whether he would take a cookie, no matter what kind.

Or maybe the cookies had been left there by a previous hermit crossing the bridge. Was it possible? The hermit didn't know. Could be.

And then, perhaps, just perhaps, the purpose of the cookies was simply to get him to think about all this stuff. Just to think. Well, he was doing that, all right. On the other hand, maybe he wasn't supposed to think. Maybe he was supposed to just do something, spur of the moment, and by thinking about it he had already failed the test.

This was the kind of thing the hermit—our hermit, and any other hermit, for that matter—had to deal with. Store owners had shoplifters. Comedians had hecklers. Fry cooks had grease burns.

And hermits had weird stuff happen for no apparent reason when they meditated. But it's just no *apparent* reason. Always, always, somehow, some way, there's a reason for everything.

Ah, to heck with it. The hermit closed his eyes, reached into the bag, and pulled out a cookie. It was oatmeal. He chomped down on it and ate as he continued walking, bag in hand. Yes, he was taking the bag.

Now, the hermit had never been much of a cookie eater, but that's what he was given, so that's what he had. Cookies.

All he needed to do now, as far as he could tell, was figure out who that girl was. He had seen other people, other beings, at other steps along his journey. But they had always belonged there. He didn't really know how he could tell, but there had never been any doubt in his mind. Each person, each being he had encountered, had had some sort of purpose that helped him along the way.

He didn't have that feeling about this girl. It was unsettling.

It was always possible, he supposed, that that was the whole idea behind having her there—to send him into unsettlement. He was pretty sure it wasn't, though.

At least he had cookies. He finished that oatmeal fella and reached into the bag again.

The mayor's daughter bit into her oatmeal cookie and chewed slowly. She opened her closet and checked out the clothes, eyeballing each item, evaluating, envisioning, and so on. Tonight was going to be a night out. It was going to be a special night out because it was her first time since the news

story on TV. It had caused something of a stir, she knew, and she wasn't sure how people at the tavern would react to her.

At the soup kitchen, and at the animal shelter, people were friendlier. Well, not friendlier so much as a little warmer. Maybe warmer isn't quite the right word. Let's say they were more amiable. Oh, I know: Genial. People were more genial.

What she had always had going for her at those places, the soup kitchen and the animal shelter, was that even if people didn't approve of her personal behavior—or, that is to say, her rumored personal behavior, they could at least see she was doing something to help make the world a better place.

You know what? We could say people were friendlier.

So the mayor's daughter looked over her wardrobe. Anything she wore would of course be the height of village fashion. It was just a matter of finding something in keeping with her mood. So she put on her best Duran Duran t-shirt and orange corduroy pants.

What the heck kind of mood was that? I don't pretend to know.

The mayor's daughter breezed into the tavern like a sports star arriving to greet autograph seekers. No one was seeking her autograph, though. She just liked to pretend. (She could, however, play a pretty strong game of tennis on a good day.)

She took her usual place at the bar. The bartender—the mayor's daughter was still keeping him in reserve—was trying to figure her out. Dressed the way she was, she was clearly looking for trouble. But they had said on the TV that she was virtuous. What was going on?

Guys checked her out. They were interested. Of course they were; how could they not be? She checked them out. That's why she was there. And finally she found herself talking to a nice young man who seemed to be someone who could excite her in all the ways she liked to be excited.

"I hear you're wholesome and virtuous," he said.

"That's what the rumor says."

"Are you?"

"Do you want me to be?"

The inane flirting went on for a while longer. (I don't want to write any more of it, and you don't want to read any more of it.) Finally, they decided to go back to his place.

And as you'd expect, there was noise. There was hootin' and hollerin', bangin' and thumpin'. Furniture flew about the room. A small vortex appeared near the ceiling. There were seismic disturbances. Some of the neighbors reported seeing a ghostly vision of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the sky.

And the guy. Oh, the guy. Nine hours later a policeman found him crawling from the apartment building, semi-conscious and barely lucid, with his clothes in tatters. His legs were painted hunter green. He was taken to the hospital and given an IV to replenish his fluids because he was dangerously close to dehydrating.

When he woke up the next day, the first thing he said was, "I think I'm in love."

A guy in a fedora and a trench coat was lurking just outside the door. As soon as he heard the mayor's daughter's guy say he was in love, he snuck away and made a phone call. He called the opposing party chairman. "She's really not wholesome," the caller reported. "She really gave it to that guy,

lucky fella." Yeah, he was the private investigator the opposing party had hired to find out about that awful news report.

"We know what the girl is doing," the chairman said. "You understand you're supposed to be investigating those news stories, don't you?"

"Well, I'm just getting started," the private investigator said, abashed. He had no idea what he was going to do with all those photographs he had taken.

And the hermit continued on his way across The Bridge of Constant Focus. The sky was a lovely, deep orange. At one point he thought he noticed a small vortex off to one side, but it didn't seem to matter.

Two weeks went by. The mayor's political party planted a couple more stories in the TV news, providing more details. The first story was about an interview they claimed to have conducted with the mayor's daughter. She didn't want to appear on camera, they said, but she wanted the village to know that she was very upset with the bad rumors about her behavior. She was grateful that the TV news was giving her a chance to tell her side of the story. (It might be noted that attentive TV viewers came away from the show thinking that although the segment had included a lot of highly emotional stuff about the girl's reputation, it had very little—well, nothing, in fact—in the way of actually telling her side of the story.)

The second planted story said that one of the guys who had spread the shocking rumors had been a known troublemaker and ne'er-do-well in the town he lived in before this one. Another one of the guys, the story said, claimed to com-

municate with the ghost of Dolly Madison on a regular basis. Yeah, how much credibility did *that* guy have, eh?

Yet the news stories, clever and devious though they were, were offset by the mayor's daughter's behavior. She wasn't stopping her escapades. And it seemed the rumors about those escapades were taking on more credibility as they continued to spread around the village. A particularly bad version of one of the rumors included a variety of extraterrestrial creatures as an audience. For some reason, the creatures were explicitly identified as electricians, truck drivers, art teachers, web site designers, printing press operators and flute teachers.

The chairman of the mayor's political party was not pleased. The mayor was supposed to be reining his daughter in, and apparently a big cloud of failure was hanging over whatever attempts he might have made, if any.

The chairman went to the mayor's office to have a little talk.

"We need to have a talk," he said.

The mayor paused the Punch-O-Rama boxing game he was playing on his computer. Three-Armed Thurston was frozen in mid-punch. "What's on your mind?" the mayor asked.

"Do you know your daughter is still cavorting with the young men of the village?"

"Well, that's nice," the mayor said.

The chairman stared at him for a moment. "Uh, do you know what cavorting means?"

He didn't. He made up something on the spot. "Doesn't it have something to do with picking up litter?"

"No, that's not what it means. It means she's still picking up guys and going home with them and engaging in shocking and immoral behavior."

"That's a lot of activity for one little word."

"Don't worry about the word," the chairman said. "The point is, you have to control that girl. We can't have her doing stuff like that."

The mayor sighed. "I understand," he said.

"Do you understand how important it is?"

"Yes, we've talked about this before. She could lose the next election for us. Believe me, I understand. I don't want to end up unemployed."

The chairman sat back and regarded the mayor. "Can you find some way to control her?"

"I think so." Actually, the mayor had absolutely no idea what he might do to control his daughter, but he was pretty sure the chairman wanted to hear a "yes." The mayor aimed to please. It's how he got to be mayor.

"Good. I would prefer it if you could handle her on your own. But if the problem continues much longer, we might have to step in with drastic measures."

This scared the mayor. It conjured up images in his mind of someone being stuffed in a 55-gallon drum and left in a landfill. That would suck. Places like that stink, and there's nothing to eat. "I promise you won't have to do that," the mayor said.

In reality, the chairman had no intention of harming anyone. The more drastic measure he had in mind was simply to have the party run a different candidate next time. But the mayor didn't have to know that. The chairman figured the

uncertainty would give the mayor greater incentive to keep the girl in line.

So that night, the mayor had another talk with his daughter. He didn't want to tell her about the chairman's threat of drastic measures because he didn't want to scare her. Besides, he wasn't sure which one of them would end up in the 55-gallon drum.

"Daughter, I've heard more stories that you've been misbehaving."

"You can't believe everything you hear, daddy. I mean, my goodness. You know how they blamed me when those stars collided in the Andromeda galaxy? It was, like, SO totally not my fault."

"The problem, sweetheart, isn't that you cause a lot of disturbances with... uh... your activity. The problem is just that your behavior is so disgraceful."

"You think I'm disgraceful?"

"No, sweetheart. No, no, no, not at all." My goodness, he thought. How could I have handled it so badly??? (But he didn't handle it all that badly. It's just that she was just handling him very well.) "No, you're not disgraceful at all."

"Oh, thank you, daddy." She lunged forward and gave him a great big ol' hug around the neck and a kiss on the cheek. "You're the best daddy ever." And with that, the mayor's daughter turned and bounded out like an excited kangaroo.

A half-hour later he was still sitting motionless, trying to think of a reply.

The hermit continued his journey along the Bridge of Constant Focus. As he walked, he enjoyed the day. The sun

was bright, the air was fresh, and birds were chirping. The bridge spanned a river of chicken noodle soup, which gave off a nice, wholesome aroma. And he had his bag of cookies.

All was right in the world of meditation and spirituality.

The hermit thought about things. He thought about movies, some of the films he had seen before he started hermit school. He thought about *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Manhattan*.

He had a spring in his step.