

The Hookie-Pookie Man

an interplanetary story
of hope, love and outsider-ness
by
Ray Holland

The Hookie-Pookie Man

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Print version:

ISBN-10: 0-615-35364-9

ISBN-13: 978-0-615-35364-7

Published by Great Big Dog

P.O. Box 161272

Louisville, KY 40252

www.greatbigdog.com

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The reason for releasing this portion of the book is that I hope you'll read it 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.

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PART ONE

What I Learned About the Hookie-Pookie Man

Uncle Steve

He sings. He dances. He juggles. He might have levitated at least once. I'm sure he would make balloon animals if he had the balloons.

The Hookie-Pookie Man first came to my attention in the summer of 2001 (nine years ago as I write this), when I saw a news story on the Internet about a man who danced the Charleston while singing Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" repeatedly, making his way from one end of an Albuquerque shopping mall to the other and back again.

Shoppers watched. They laughed. They pointed. They took pictures. No one tried to stop him. In fact, people broke into applause after he left.

Descriptions of the man were remarkably consistent. He was tall, something over six feet, and thin. Lanky, you might say, or wiry. He had long, stringy, dishwater-blond hair and a beard. His clothes were old and dirty and tattered, as if he had been wearing them for months. No one got close enough to find out what he smelled like, but he looked dirty—unwashed.

The news story didn't include any information about the man—what his name was, where he came from,

where he went afterward, what he did for a living, what toppings he preferred on a hot fudge sundae. He was just some guy sandwiched in between a segment about a four-year-old who had raised five hundred dollars for an animal shelter and another segment about a doughnut-eating contest.

I wondered about him, though.

A bit of info about me: My name is Dr. Herman Schnauzer. I'm 49, and I've been divorced for seven years, after an 18-year marriage. My ex is in Dallas designing web sites. We're not in contact anymore, not even to send Christmas cards.

My daughter Tammy is at the University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. I talk to her on the phone occasionally, and she comes to visit twice a year: for a week in the summer and at Thanksgiving.

She's a sweet girl.

Other details: I'm a professor of extraterrestrial anthropology at Great Southern University in Fielding, Tennessee. You haven't heard of us? We're not well-known to the general public, to be sure, but we're a highly respected school in certain academic circles. Maybe if we had a Division I basketball team, it would be different.

Fielding? It's a nice, little college town, quiet unless you happen to drive by a keg party on a weekend.

But more to the point, you're probably sitting there thinking, "Hey, wait a minute. Back up. Extraterrestrial anthropology? *Extraterrestrial*??? What's up with that? Is there such a thing? Do we know enough about extraterrestrials to have anthropology about them?"

To answer all these questions:

Yes.

Yes.

We study the cultures and societies of other planets.

Yes.

No, we don't know much. It's a new science. We're trying to learn. As such, I'm the head and the entire faculty of the department, which is now about three months old.

At the time of the Charleston incident, though, I was a cultural anthropology professor, and all I knew was that I had found a story about a weird guy at a mall. I didn't attach any special significance to it. I just thought it was amusing, so I printed it out for my personal amusing-story archives.

About a month later, I ran across another story. A man was seen doing push-ups on top of an old Ford Pinto station wagon at the Utah State Fair.

No one thought much of it, including the owner of the Pinto. After all, there was no damage to the car. The story was reported simply because it was odd—and because someone had shot video of the man doing two hundred and twenty-three push-ups.

That's a lot of push-ups, and the number doesn't include the ones he did before the amateur videographer started shooting. (And, incidentally, it was then that it occurred to me what remarkable condition a man would have to be in to do the Charleston from one end of a shopping mall to the other and back again—even in a small-ish mall. I'm doubtful that I could make it half-way across the food court.)

Particularly interesting was that the descriptions of the push-up guy matched the descriptions of the

Charleston guy.

I printed out the push-up story and filed it away with the first one.

Two weeks later, a story from Butte, Montana: A man (yes, fitting the same description) walked on his hands across a construction site while reciting passages from *The Warren Commission Report*. Upon reaching the other side of the site, he stepped behind a backhoe and came out with an Easter basket, which he had presumably stashed there before starting his little show, and began wolfing down chunks of sushi from it. It *appeared* to be sushi, anyway.

In an interview, the foreman made a comment about safety at the site and falling behind schedule, but otherwise, no one seemed very upset by it.

The implication was clear. This guy was wandering from town to town, performing bizarre but mostly harmless little stunts.

Why? Who could say? He might have simply been some sort of free spirit. Or he might have been seriously disturbed. He might have been leading up to a grand political or social or artistic statement. It might have been viral marketing for an upcoming movie. Or some combination thereof.

I took a couple days off and flew to Butte to interview the construction workers.

“It would have been funny, I guess, except that he was getting in the way,” one worker said. “But still, no one got pissed off about it.”

“I was in a meeting at the time,” the foreman said. “I didn’t know what happened until he was gone or I would have run his ass out of there. Construction sites

are dangerous places.”

“Why do you think he might have done it?” I asked.

He shook his head. “All I can say is, some people are crazy.” He paused a moment, then added, “I guess this is better than being the type of crazy that makes you a serial killer.”

It wasn't clear what this guy's intentions were, but one thing was sparkling, crystal clear: I was going to have to watch out for more stories about him. I went so far as to sign up for an account with a service that provided video clips of news stories. It was like a subscription. Every month they sent me a DVD with segments from both national and local news shows, reporting on whatever this fellow had done recently. One of my favorites was a segment that included cell phone video of him sitting on top of a sixteen-foot-tall sign in front of a dentist's office shouting, “Read more comic books! Read more comic books!”

“Words to live by,” the news anchor said. “Words to live by.”

About six months after I began following his adventures, he became known to the public as Uncle Steve. This came about after an episode in which he had stood on the front steps of a county courthouse somewhere in Iowa, juggling galoshes and spouting off quotes from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. One of the witnesses—who happened to be a public defender, if I recall correctly—commented, “He looked like my Uncle Steve.”

The name took. After that, he was known as Uncle Steve on the TV news, in the newspapers, on blogs, and so on. “Uncle Steve strikes again” might be a typical headline. It's worth noting that coverage of his esca-

pades increased at about the same time. I think it was simply because he now had a name.

So Uncle Steve gained what you might call a cult following for a while. A few web sites tracked his adventures, and you could buy Uncle Steve t-shirts and coffee mugs and bobble-head dolls, and so on. It was all strictly unauthorized and unofficial. He may have known this was going on, but if so, I have to think he didn't care.

I found a couple web sites with made-up trivia:

- Uncle Steve can walk on snow without leaving footprints.
- Uncle Steve once composed a whole opera by accident while trying to write down a phone message for his mother.
- Uncle Steve has X-Ray vision on the night of a full moon.
- Uncle Steve has perfected time travel but doesn't know it.
- Uncle Steve used to be a lamppost on Bourbon Street.
- Uncle Steve's voice causes mushrooms to grow twice as fast as they normally would.

And so on.

Through the following years, I studied all the Uncle Steve stories and articles very closely. I mapped out trends. I conducted content analyses. I made charts and graphs. I discovered that people had posted cell phone videos of his antics on Youtube. I spent a lot of time doing all this—all this and more—but for a long time I thought of it as nothing more than a hobby.

Eventually, though, I became convinced that this man was worthy of more serious research. And so, in early 2008, I applied for a sabbatical to pursue my research full-time.

The difficulty was that describing him on my application as “a guy acting weird” seemed . . . well, trivial. I felt the need to exaggerate the reasons for my interest, ever-so-slightly, on my application. I hypothesized links between these incidents and selected Greek myths, Aztec rituals, Macedonian laws, Native American legends, Medieval Italian poetry and African folk tales, as well as passages from *The Art of War* and certain conventions in silent film comedies.

I proposed a book that would be a thorough study of the psychosocioeconomic background of the forces that combined to create Uncle Steve. I suggested that in time, perhaps the not-too-distant future, we would see more guys like him. We might be overrun with them, and many would undoubtedly be far more outrageous. They wouldn’t organize, obviously, but still, they would be a force to be reckoned with. We needed to understand what was going on.

I put all that on the application, and immediately after turning it in, I became convinced I had gone too far. Who would take it seriously?

I spent the following weeks fretting and sweating, convinced that I had blown it with a preposterous display of meaningless hyperbole. But, for whatever reason, it apparently struck the right note with the administration. I would be on leave for the Fall, 2008 term, free to do whatever I thought I needed to do to learn more about Uncle Steve, the Hookie-Pookie Man.

Going to Alabama

By the most wonderful coincidence I can imagine, Uncle Steve—I was soon to learn his real name was Dwight Arnold Toshman—was arrested in Adams Junction, Alabama on the very first day of my sabbatical. Not that it was wonderful for him to get himself arrested, but given that it happened, it was great timing.

It's worth nothing that getting arrested is rare for Dwight. Most of his antics are simply amusing and harmless. It seems that people don't think about calling the police, even if they're so inclined, until some time after he's already made his getaway. They get caught up in his act. Those construction workers did. The foreman who said he would have hustled Dwight away if he had been there? Maybe, but I'm not so sure.

Unfortunately, a couple times he crossed the line far enough to get himself locked up. About three years previously, police in Cleveland had arrested him when someone caught him painting lines to divide the downtown sidewalks into lanes. Fortunately, this had been at the height of Uncle Stevemania, and fans chipped in to pay his fine and the cleanup costs. In fact, I donated twenty dollars. (Incidentally, it was during this episode that his real name became known to the public, al-

though very few people used it. “Uncle Steve,” being well established by then, persisted as the preferred name. Also clouding the issue was his habit of giving various fake names when people asked him who he was. To this day, my next-door neighbor Lonnie refers to him as Herbert Wellegue Manticore, a name Dwight gave when a TV reporter stopped him for an interview in Salinas about five years ago.)

And this time: I was in the kitchen looking for popcorn when I overheard the TV in the living room; a CNN anchor was saying, “For those of you who have been following the adventures of Uncle Steve, we have a report from Alabama. Police in Adams Junction arrested him early this afternoon after he skateboarded into the emergency room at Pemberton Memorial Hospital and threw up all over a man who was waiting to be treated for food poisoning.”

An online map showed me I could make the drive in less than two hours. I didn’t know how long they would hold him, or whether someone would bail him out before I could get there—or, for that matter, whether the police would tell me to get lost. But it was worth a try. I threw a change of clothes into a gym bag, filled up my car with gas, and took off.

At the police station, I pretended to know him. “He spent a few days at my house last summer,” I told Sergeant Meanders.

“He’s an odd one,” Sergeant Meanders said. “You know, sometimes guys have weird reactions to getting locked up. Your friend said he was going to turn into steam and evaporate his way out of the cell. He sat on the floor, cross-legged, and he started saying, ‘I’m getting hotter. I’m getting hotter.’ Over and over again.

Hoskins said he thought your friend levitated a couple inches off the floor.”

“I did *not* say that,” an officer across the room said. “What I said was that he reminded me of those guys who can levitate.”

Sergeant Meanders sighed. “No one can levitate.”

“Probably not,” I said. “But if anyone could do it, he would be the one.”

“Yeah. Power of suggestion. I think he’s the kind of guy who could pull something like that off. You know, make someone *think* he was levitating.”

“I didn’t think he was levitating,” Hoskins said.

“When I met him, he told me he was from another planet,” I said. “I almost started believing it.” I had no clue. I was just making stuff up.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I said, warming to the task of improvising my story. “He said his flying saucer crashed out in the countryside. He insisted on sleeping on my roof so he could watch for his friends coming to rescue him.”

Sergeant Meanders’ eyes grew wide. “On your roof?”

“Yeah. I told him no. I didn’t want some guy up on my roof. If he were to fall off and break his neck, suddenly I would be looking at a major lawsuit.”

“You have to think about things like that,” Sergeant Meanders said. “It happens.”

“Sure. But then I went to the bathroom to take a whiz, and before I knew it, there was all this clomping around on my roof. I went outside and looked up, and there he was. He had climbed up the downspout. He wanted to spend the night up there. He said he was expecting his friends Igga and Pigga to deliver a spare part he needed to repair his spaceship.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yeah. So I made him come down. He whined and cried like a small child, but I couldn’t let him stay up there. Finally, he agreed to sleep on the sofa, in the living room. We went inside and went to sleep. A couple hours later, a bunch of clomping and thumping and bumping up on top of the house woke me up. I went outside, and he was up there spreading out blankets, making a place to sleep.”

“Wow. So . . . what happened?”

“I had to bribe him down.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding. I offered him a big bowl of vanilla ice cream, and he was all happy and stuff. He came right down and wolfed down that big bowl of ice cream—five scoops—standing in the middle of my back yard. Took him about a minute and a half to finish it off.”

“He didn’t get a headache?”

“Not that I could tell. He finished it off as quickly as he could and licked the bowl clean. I told him he could have more in the morning if he stayed inside all night.”

“Did he?”

“Sure enough. Happy as a clam. We stayed up the rest of the night playing checkers.”

“That’s amazing,” Sergeant Meanders said. “Vanilla ice cream.”

“Who would have thought?” I said.

“Was he any good at checkers?”

“Funny you should ask. He was very inconsistent. He would play one game and pull off all these amazing moves, like a world-class genius. Deadly effective tactics you never would have imagined. He would spring a trap, and I would think back through the last dozen or so moves and see how he had carefully—and cunningly—set me up. Incredible. Then, next game, he would play

like someone who barely knew the rules. It went on like that all night, back and forth between genius play and not knowing what he was doing. I couldn't figure it out."

"Strange."

"Yeah, but that's exactly what you would expect from him, isn't it?"

Sergeant Meanders nodded. "One thing I was wondering," he said. "Do you know his real name? He told me he was John Steinbeck."

"I don't know. He told me he was Thor Jurassic. It was obviously a made-up name, but I didn't press him."

Sergeant Meanders worked his computer mouse a little and clicked a couple times. "After we got his fingerprints, we ran some queries and found that he has used the names John Steinbeck, Casey Jones, John Quincy Adams, Sergei Eisenstein, Stagger Lee, Johnny Apollo—I like that one—Philo T. Farnsworth, Nick Rolinsky . . . the list goes on."

I offered to post bail, but there was none. The judge, knowing something of Uncle Steve's—Dwight's—ah, shall we say colorful . . . history, felt there was no *risk* that he would flee—it was a *certainty*. I had to agree. And he wouldn't flee to escape justice. He would flee because that's what he would do.

"Do you know if he has any family?" I asked. I wasn't sure whether I was going too far with this question, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

Sergeant Meanders grimaced. "We've been trying to figure that out. He keeps saying his mother lives at the North Pole. Won't budge from that story. So we're investigating. Haven't found out anything we can be sure of. Not yet."

"Is there any chance I could talk to him?" I asked.

"Sure. He can have visitors."

Now I was on the spot. I hadn't thought things through this far. That is to say, I had made the trip hoping to meet Dwight, but I had absolutely no idea what I would say. It also occurred to me that he wouldn't know me, contrary to Sergeant Meanders' expectations. Would I get busted for lying to a police officer about knowing an inmate? What was the penalty for that? Probably whatever the officer wanted it to be.

But then again, I couldn't say no. I had made the 200-mile trip and claimed to be a friend, yet I didn't want to see him? What would *that* look like? Further, how could I pass up what might be my only opportunity to meet Uncle Steve? Dwight?

"Great," I said.

Sergeant Meanders led me back to Dwight's cell. "Hey, Uncle Steve, I brought a friend to see you."

Dwight jumped up off his cot. "Oh, boy! A friend!" And so, having been primed to think of me as a friend, he did.

"Do you remember me?" I asked. "I'm Herman. You wanted to spend the night up on my roof one night last summer."

Dwight scrunched up his face, deep in thought. "Yeah, I remember," he finally said. "Up on your roof."

Sergeant Meanders smiled in satisfaction, presumably over bringing two old friends together again.

"It rained, didn't it?" Dwight said. "Big storm."

I snuck a sideways glance at Sergeant Meanders to see how he would react to this discrepancy in our stories. His smile fell very slightly.

"No, you must be thinking about some other roof where you spent the night," I said. "I got you to come down because I didn't think it was safe up there. We went inside and played checkers. Remember?"

“Yeah!” Dwight said. “Yeah, I remember now.”

Sergeant Meanders’ smile went back to its former state of fullness.

“And I won every game,” Dwight said.

Sergeant Meanders’ smile dropped again.

“No, that wasn’t me. You told me about someone else you played checkers with, and you won every game. I think you told me that because you were trying to psyche me out. You and I, both of us won games.”

Dwight pondered again. After a moment he said, “Oh, yeah. I remember now.”

Sergeant Meanders’ smile returned.

“And you had peach yogurt,” Dwight said. “We sat in the kitchen and ate lots of peach yogurt.”

Sergeant Meanders’ smile vanished.

“Vanilla ice cream,” I said. “You ate it in my back yard. Wolfed it down like you hadn’t eaten in days.”

“Are you sure it was vanilla ice cream?”

Wanting to get out of this tangle as quickly as possible, I went along with him. “I thought I remembered vanilla ice cream, but it could have been peach yogurt.”

Dwight was apparently satisfied, and Sergeant Meanders’ smile came back. “Herman wanted to post bail for you, but I had to tell him the judge wouldn’t allow it.”

“What a nice thing to do,” Dwight said. I’m pretty sure he didn’t understand what Sergeant Meanders had told him, nor was I sure about what it was that he thought was a nice thing, if anything.

Or something.

At any rate, I had to act like a friend in front of the sergeant. “How they treatin’ you?” I asked.

“They won’t give me vanilla ice cream,” Dwight said.

“Did you ask for it?”

Dwight thought for a moment. "No."

"I don't know if they'll give it to you or not, but if you ask, they might."

Dwight turned to Sergeant Meanders. "Can I have some vanilla ice cream?"

"I can probably get you some."

This seemed like an opportune time to make my move. "Dwight, would you like me to call your mother?" I wasn't sure if he would understand the situation well enough to explain it to her himself.

"My mother?" He seemed surprised by the idea.

"Yeah. I was thinking maybe I should give her a call to let her know what's going on."

"That would be a good idea. I think you should do that."

I nodded.

"Tell her I said hi," he added.

"I can call her on my cell phone, right here and now, and you can tell her yourself."

"Oh?" It sounded as if the idea was strange to him.

"What do you mean, 'oh?' Don't you call her sometimes?"

"Why would I do that?"

"She's your mother. Don't you talk to her?"

"I haven't talked to her since I left home," he said.

"Don't you want to?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I never have anything I need to tell her."

"Nothing at all? You never call to say hi, so she'll know you're all right?"

"It doesn't seem important enough for a phone call."

"I'm willing to bet that for her, it is. She probably worries about you."

"Why? I'm all right."

That was as far as I was prepared to discuss it. It was clear that I wasn't going to get through to him. I felt as if I were getting into an argument, but Dwight wasn't arguing. He was simply stating, matter-of-factly, that he was all right. He might not have understood why I wanted to talk about calling his mother.

"Okay," I said. "I'll call her later and tell her you said hi."

"Yeah, do that," Dwight said.

So that was that, but it was strange. I could have understood it if he had said there was some sort of alienation or antagonism between them, that she had mistreated him as a child, and he hated her guts and would rather swallow a mouthful of bees than talk to her. That kind of thing is unfortunate, but it happens. But no, Dwight's story was nothing like that.

It was just plain *weird*.

Sergeant Meanders left the room, and I chatted with Dwight for a few more minutes. He told me about some of the things he had done recently. He had been to New Orleans, doing jumping jacks on Bourbon Street. He had stayed high up in a tree on a playground in Tallahassee for four straight days, unnoticed by anyone.

He had lots of stories.

Wendy and Fran

Dwight gave me his mother's phone number. No, he never called her, but yes, he had her number. Wendy was her name. Wendy Flatt. And so I sat in my car, in the police station parking lot, phone in hand, wondering how the heck I was going to introduce myself when she answered.

Finally deciding to wing it, I made the call. "My name is Herman Schnauzer, and I'm a friend of your son."

"Uh . . ." Wendy said, ". . . uh . . . what happened?"

I could hear the dread in her voice. She had probably been expecting, from the instant he left home, a phone call with news that he had pulled some kind of beyond-the-pale stunt and provoked someone to shoot him in the head or to beat him into a coma with a two-by-four.

"He's been arrested, but I think things can be resolved without too much trouble." I went on to explain that I had taken an interest in her son by way of the occasional news stories, and that I had been researching him. I told her about my failed attempt to post bail. I told her about meeting him. I told her about Bourbon Street and the playground. And then, I admitted that I wasn't sure about his name.

“Dwight,” she told me. “His name is Dwight Arnold Toshman.”

“I’ve heard the name mentioned in a few of the news stories,” I said.

“I’ve seen a lot of those stories,” she said. “It breaks my heart. He’s always been a misfit.” Her sadness sort of oozed through the phone and filled the car. But if she was willing to talk about it, so was I.

“He was the same way as a child?”

“More-or-less. It was hard for him to learn not to do anything harmful or illegal. And still, it seems, he slips up sometimes.”

“Did you ever . . . ” I didn’t know how to ask the question.

“Take him to get psychological help?”

“Did you?”

“Yes. But that’s not really the problem. There’s more to the story than you might think. It’s very unusual.”

Given what I already knew about Dwight, I was at a loss to imagine what might be unusual. “Can you tell me about it?” I asked, hoping I sounded properly concerned, not too eager.

She sighed, and the line went silent for several long seconds. “You have to understand, Dr. Schnauzer, you’re a complete stranger.”

And I thought I had been doing so well. “I understand,” I said. And then, I decided to toss in, “He said he misses playing checkers with you.”

“He said that?”

“He did.”

“We never played checkers,” Wendy said.

“Oh.”

“He talked about it a lot. The thing was, every time I offered to play with him, he wanted to put it off until

later.”

“I guess I misunderstood.”

“I could tell you more about Dwight,” she said. “But I can’t do it over the phone.”

I think she meant it as an offhand comment rather than an offer. But it was an opening. “I’m working on a book about him. Would it be possible to meet you?” I asked. I desperately hoped she wouldn’t think I was coming on too strong.

“I’m in San Francisco.”

“I can fly out there.”

She was agreeable to that. But I had to do some planning because I didn’t want to let Dwight slip through my grasp. The jailhouse didn’t seem like a place where I could conduct marathon interviews with him. But if I could glom onto him when he was released, we would have as much time together as he could tolerate.

I went back inside the police station and asked Sergeant Meanders how long he was going to hold Dwight.

“He has a court date on the fifteenth, so he won’t be out before then. After that, it depends on how things go.”

I had about two weeks.

It took me a week to get things arranged. I wanted to be able to take off and let the trip be open-ended, with no regard as to when I might come back. Unfortunately, I was having problems finding a house sitter who was willing to take on the job without knowing whether I would come back the next day or the next month.

In the meantime, I talked to Wendy a couple more times. I explained to her that at first, my interest in her son had been mostly personal, that he had captured my imagination, and I wanted to find out more about this

unusual character.

I told her about my hobby evolving into serious research. We discussed the book that would—that might—come of it. Wendy understood that there was some interest in his story. People were writing things about him, most of it favorable, some of it critical. She allowed as how an in-depth book about Dwight, written by someone with a professional and sympathetic interest, might be a good thing. She also believed it would be advantageous if she could have some input.

Input from the man's mother! Yes, I would certainly be interested in that.

She continued not to want to tell me about Dwight's childhood over the phone, but that was all right. I could wait. For the time being, I was enjoying getting to know her.

She worked as an office manager at a local manufacturing plant and spent her spare time filling sketchbook after sketchbook with drawings: Pictures of people sitting at bus stops, people walking through the shopping mall, people playing soccer, and so on. She liked to go out three or four times a week, find a spot to sit for a couple hours, and draw whatever happened to be there. I asked her if she had thought about pursuing some sort of career in art.

"Oh, heavens no," she said. "I'm not nearly good enough. It's just my way of . . ." she stopped herself. "You'll think it's silly."

"I'm in no position to accuse someone else of being silly," I said.

"Well, it's just my way of, sort of . . . creating a little world that I'm in control of."

I asked to see a couple pieces. She had scanned some of her favorites and was able to send me jpegs of a guy

washing the front window of an antique store and a woman jogging through the park. Not good enough? They looked pretty good to me.

I found out she had acted in a couple of low-budget movies. They were typical independent productions made by directors who considered themselves up-and-coming filmmakers with aspirations of getting some industry attention. One was a story about a nineteen-year-old girl who worked in a bakery. Her boyfriend proposed to her, and she was incredibly excited about the upcoming wedding. Then he got fired for punching out his boss over some insignificant disagreement. Wendy played the girl's older sister. The other movie was a sort of crime thriller about a guy who robbed a jewelry store, escaped to a nearby apartment building, and took one of the residents—played by Wendy—hostage. It was a very, very low-budget affair, shot entirely in the woman's apartment. While Wendy admitted that the idea wasn't groundbreaking in its originality, she said the script was very cleverly written, alternately giving the impression that the two were falling in love and/or that she was eventually going to talk him into turning himself in. It ended with the police shooting the guy through the window when they thought he was going to hurt her.

And, to explain the different last names, Wendy told me that she had Dwight when she was single. About ten years later she married a man named Barry Flatt, but because of Dwight's behavior the marriage didn't last long. In fact, it lasted a grand total of six weeks. I had to wonder—as did Wendy herself—why he married her in the first place. He had known her for almost two years before proposing. It's not as if he didn't have some sort of clue as to what he was getting into.

The search for a house sitter continued. I talked to a half-dozen or so applicants who were unsuitable for one reason or another. Some were slovenly, some struck me as untrustworthy, and so on. A couple looked good but didn't like the uncertain timeframe.

Then, a young lady named Fran, a student, called. I took a liking to her immediately, and we had lunch in my kitchen—grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. She was eager to move in, and she proposed that I rent her my guest bedroom for the duration of my sabbatical. She could work off the rent by doing housework, cooking and laundry. That would allow her make plans through the next few months, and it would allow me to take off at a moment's notice for future trips if I needed to. And, not to be overlooked, it would also get my floor vacuumed on a regular basis.

It sounded like a good deal. "No wild parties," I told her.

"I don't like wild parties," she said. "I'm a fairly sedate person."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"I like girls."

Oh, okay. On the one hand, I was relieved to find out she wouldn't be bringing a college-aged boyfriend into the place. On the other hand, I had no idea what a college-aged lesbian girlfriend might be like, from my perspective as a homeowner. On yet the *other* hand, I didn't think Fran was likely to have a romantic interest of any sort who would destroy my house. I let that line of questioning drop.

Fran told me the reason she was interested in the job—in the room—was that she was about to go crazy in the three-bedroom apartment she shared with four

friends. She wanted privacy. She wanted quiet. She wanted her books to remain where she had laid them down.

“I can certainly understand that,” I said.

She was a history major. She wanted to teach history. She wanted to write books about history. Her choices of four historical figures to have dinner with were Cleopatra, Sappho, Golda Meir and Mae West.

I wouldn't mind having dinner with Mae West myself.

I liked her. Fran, that is. She was bright. She was funny. She rattled off dozens of elephant jokes with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old. She was pleasant to be around. She offered references, but I didn't call them.

Later that day, I was next door, hanging out with my neighbor Lonnie. We were sitting by his pool with a six-pack. “I'm going on sabbatical, and I'll be doing some traveling,” I told him.

“Sweet,” he said.

“Yeah. So you'll be seeing a young lady around. Her name's Fran. She's house sitting for me.”

“What are you going to be doing on this sabbatical?”

“You know that Uncle Steve guy?”

“The one who does the weird stuff?”

“Yeah, that's the one. I'm going to do some research on him.”

“What kind of research?”

“Trying to find out more about him.”

“How much could there be to find out? He's some weird, freaky guy.”

“If that's all there is, then that's what I'll find out.”

Lonnie took a long drink from his beer. “I wish I had a job like yours,” he said.

Going to San Francisco

Wendy came to meet me at the airport and recognized me immediately by the Ramones t-shirt I had told her I would wear. “Herman!” she shouted at me from thirty feet away.

She was about five-five, with about ten extra pounds that didn’t look bad on her. Her hair was light brown, shoulder-length and neatly cut, with touches of gray here and there. I had expected that raising a child like Dwight would have worn her down and beaten some of the life out of her. But she appeared to be full of vitality, with a sparkle in her eye. She looked intelligent and thoughtful, and handled herself with confidence.

If any life had been beaten out of her, she nonetheless had quite a bit left.

She took me to a nice restaurant called Smedley’s. After the meal, we sat and talked and drank coffee. We got better acquainted, with no talk of Dwight.

And me, I was distracted by wanting to kiss her. I was distracted by wanting to do other things. Lots of other things involving the removal of clothing and getting arms and legs tangled up. I couldn’t say so, though. I had to remain professional. I had to do everything possible to make sure she wouldn’t question my motives.

For the next few days I stayed in my motel room during the day while Wendy went to work. I did research on the net and went out occasionally for a bit of sightseeing on my own. Nights, we went out together. Wednesday, she took me to open stage night at Frendelli's, where a couple of her friends did a fifteen-minute folk music set. Wendy introduced me to some of the people she knew and sketched the performers—very nice drawings of people strumming acoustic guitars and singing. Admittedly, I wasn't an impartial judge, but I have to say the art was better than the music.

Friday evening, she invited me to her place. It was, she told me, the house she, and then Dwight, had grown up in—left to her by her parents. Her father had died five years previously, and her mother two.

We talked for a while and watched *Plan B*, the hostage movie she had starred in. It was, as Wendy had said, very much a low-budget affair through and through, but it was fun to watch her in a movie.

Much to my disappointment, nothing vile or depraved happened that night. I reminded myself, though, that the important thing was to keep a professional distance. I was doing research. So I slept on her sofa.

Saturday, she told me about Dwight.

It was the late seventies—Labor Day weekend, 1979, to be precise. Wendy was in her early twenties and single. She and her best friend Melanie, taking their first vacation from their first “real jobs” after college, were basking in the warm Fort Lauderdale, Florida sunshine by the pool at their motel.

They were young, they were happy, and by golly, they had the world in a headlock (metaphorically speaking).

And so it was only natural that they caught the attention of a couple fellas who were also staying at the motel, fellas who introduced themselves at the poolside as Henry and Larry. Wendy told me they were manly and good looking. They were funny and charming.

They were smooth operators.

Henry and Larry were smooth enough, in fact, to accomplish in one day what I had yet to accomplish in almost a week. This part of the story distressed me—not because I had any old-fashioned notions about ladylike behavior and purity and such. No, no, not at all. My problem was simply that by comparison, I felt inferior. Never mind that that was thirty years ago, that Wendy had grown and matured since then, that she had undoubtedly mellowed out over the years and learned a few things about . . . well, about treating men with a certain amount of caution. Never mind that I was playing an entirely different game than those guys were, that I could not possibly have bedded Wendy (yet) because I had not made any moves on her. Never mind all that. They had scored the first night, and I hadn't. I could understand intellectually that it was a silly thing to dwell on. But the reason it bothered me wasn't an intellectual one.

Anyway, Wendy paired off with Henry. They locked themselves in her and Melanie's room for three days. She didn't go into detail, nor did I want her to. Simply knowing that whatever they did, they did it for three whole days was mind-boggling enough. And Larry and Melanie were doing much the same thing, whatever it was, in the guys' room.

On the morning of the fourth day, the couples had breakfast together at a nearby restaurant, then adjourned to Henry and Larry's room. Henry placed two

sealed envelopes on the dresser. One was marked WENDY and the other MELANIE. "We have to go now," Henry said. "You're about to see something very strange, and these notes will explain it."

After indulging in drawn-out good-bye kisses, the guys took small devices that looked sort of like television remote controls out of their pockets. They punched a few buttons and disappeared. POOF! they were gone.

Gone.

"I still remember it very clearly," Wendy told me. "The air where they had been sitting kind of rippled a little bit, like a special effect in a movie."

The women sat there, astonished, for some unknown amount of time. Gradually, they came back to their senses.

"Did they . . . like . . . *disappear* . . . right in front of us?" Wendy asked.

"I'm not sure," Melanie said, "but I think they did."

Wendy told me she still had her note. It was stashed away in the bottom drawer of a two-drawer file cabinet nestled in the back corner of her walk-in closet. On top of the cabinet, a blown-glass swan sat majestically.

She handed me the note:

Dear Wendy,

I want to apologize for what must have been a very disturbing exit. Larry and I have found through long experience that this is the best way to handle it, as explaining things in conversation before we leave gets terribly awkward. We think you deserve to know the truth, and we hope the fact that you saw us disappear in front of you will be proof enough that what I'm about to tell you is true.

To put it bluntly, we're from another planet. The

name of our planet is The Hookie-Pookie Planet. It's several hundred light-years away in the direction, from Earth, of Sirius.

Believe it or not, life on the Hookie-Pookie Planet is much like life on Earth, except for certain subtle psychological differences that arise in childhood. And, funnily enough, our earlobes are a slightly darker color than the rest of our skin. A lot of people wouldn't notice it, but it's there if you look. Go figure.

Also, Hookie-Pookie people have developed some technologies that Earth people haven't, and vice versa. One of the technologies that we have is called the Instantaneous Matter Transport Device. It's very much like what you on Earth would call teleportation. We can push a few buttons on a little hand-held gizmo, and then we disappear and reappear anywhere we want. That's what you just saw.

On the Hookie-Pookie Planet, Larry and I work together as RV salesmen. In case you're wondering why we have RV's when we have the IMTD, it's because a lot of people enjoy driving around. As far as that goes, it's like Earth. So we sell RV's, and we work hard at it. We do a good job, and we make so much money we don't know what to do with it all.

What we like to do with our weekends, Larry and I, is transport ourselves to other planets and carouse with the native women. On the Hookie-Pookie Planet, we have a ten-day week with a three-day weekend. After we get off work on Smoofday afternoon, the last day before the weekend, Henry and I take showers and grab our suitcases, and we transport ourselves to whatever planet we've chosen. And BOOM! there we are, ready for three days of debauchery.

You don't believe any of this, do you?

It went on for another page with personal and affectionate, although not especially sentimental, stuff.

Melanie ripped her note to shreds. She was so angry she couldn't talk about it. All she could do was sputter and curse incoherently and call Larry names.

Later in the day, Melanie had calmed down, but she still didn't believe a word of that note—not even the part about selling RVs. She didn't know how they had managed to disappear in front of them, but she was dead certain it had nothing to do with remote controls or teleportation. Did those men take them for fools? “This is an insult. Do they think we're stupid?” she said. “The whole thing was nothing more than a fling. They could have walked out the door and said, ‘see ya.’ And that would have been the end of it because that's the way these things go. But no. They had to disappear with some kind of silly, made-up story. It's an insult.”

Wendy was more moderate. “They didn't have to tell us all about that,” she said. “They could have said good-bye and taken a cab to some out-of-the way place where they could transport themselves out of here without anyone seeing anything.”

“Transport themselves out? What are you talking about? Do you actually believe this nonsense?”

“I don't know, but I know what I saw. They could have been telling the truth.”

“They *could have* done lots of things. They could have told us they were world famous brain surgeons and had to go perform an emergency operation. They could have told us they were double-naught spies and had to go catch a master criminal before he could take over the world. But what they did was choose to play some kind of sick joke on us.”

“But,” Wendy said, “didn’t you notice they had dark earlobes?”

“No, I didn’t. And even if I did, is that supposed to prove they’re from *another freakin’ planet*? Get serious! They’re probably brothers, and it’s an odd genetic trait that runs in the family. They lied to us. And let’s not even *mention* the ‘long experience’ that led them to leave us these notes. You know what that means, don’t you? It means we were nothing more than lumps of meat to them.”

Wendy sighed. “Of course we were lumps of meat to them. And they were lumps of meat to us. That’s what a ‘fling’ is all about.”

“Sure,” Melanie said. “But you maintain a pretense. You don’t come right out and *say* it.”

“I think you’re overreacting, that’s all. Maybe we should drop it.”

“All right,” Melanie said. “But don’t ever, ever, *ever* mention those two pigs to me ever again.”

Despite their intentions never to speak of the two pigs ever again, the subject soon became impossible to avoid: Both of them were pregnant, and there was no doubt as to who the fathers were. While on that one occasion they had indeed indulged in casual sex with guys they had just met, it really did happen on that one occasion only. They weren’t promiscuous. Henry and Larry were the only possible suspects.

Melanie—as well she might—took this, the pregnancy, as further evidence that those two guys were subhuman slime, unfit and unworthy to enjoy the society of civilized human beings.

Wendy agreed wholeheartedly. But hard as it was to believe that Henry and Larry had come from another

planet, they had indeed disappeared right in front of her, special effects and all. If that constituted proof, then maybe the next step in the logic was to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they had not anticipated that they could get Earth women pregnant.

But that didn't really matter. Those guys, those pigs, were gone. Regardless of what anyone might have or could have or should have anticipated, neither Wendy nor Melanie expected to see them again. The big problem, the immediate problem, was to deal with the babies.

Wendy's parents offered to help raise her child. They spent hours planning, scheming and figuring things out. Budgets, schedules, the whole works. Finally, satisfied that they had a workable plan, she moved back in with them, and they began preparing for the upcoming arrival. Wendy found the situation scary, but she was sure they could deal with it.

"Didn't you think about . . . alternatives?" I asked.

"Abortion? No. I might have, but only as a last resort, if I was desperate. I really didn't want it to come to that."

"Adoption?"

"I never thought seriously about it. I knew I couldn't carry a child, give birth, and then give him up."

The babies came, and as we already know, Wendy named hers Dwight. Melanie's baby was a girl, and she named hers Amanda Lynn. Amanda Lynn Zigers.

And the babies' earlobes were dark. No big deal, though, if it was nothing more an odd genetic trait—a quirk, if you will—that ran in the fathers' family.

What was indisputably a big deal was that gradually, their friendship died out. Wendy tried to keep it

going—they had been such good friends for many years, and now, more than ever, they needed each other’s support. “I called her once a week, sometimes more. I tried to get her to do stuff on weekends. I’d call her and say, ‘Let’s go to a movie,’ or ‘Let’s go to the mall.’ At first, sometimes she would go. We went to see *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, and she loved it.

“The last time we had fun as a group, the four of us, was one day when we went to the zoo. I remember the kids stood there watching the bears for . . . well, it had to be a good half-hour. They really liked it when one of them stood up on his hind legs and looked around. They thought that was hilarious. For the rest of the day, Dwight and Amanda Lynn were constantly imitating the bears, standing up in a sort of bear-like posture and clawing at the air with their little hands. We even taught them to growl while they were doing it. It was the most adorable thing I had ever seen.”

“I bet it was.”

“But after that, Melanie became more distant. She got more and more grumpy and hard to deal with. We argued a lot. I felt as if everything I said touched a raw nerve, just because it was me saying it. I don’t suppose she was like that all the time, with everyone. But for me, talking to her on the phone got to be real work. If we weren’t arguing about something, she wouldn’t say any more than ‘yeah’ or ‘no,’ and then after five minutes she had to go. Then it got so that every time I called, she told me she was ‘in the middle of something’ and couldn’t talk.”

“In the middle of something.”

“Right. But she would never say what she was in the middle of. So I called less frequently, and one day I realized I hadn’t talked to her for a year. It had been even

longer since I had last seen her—maybe a year and a half. And that was that.”

“That’s a shame,” I said.

Wendy said, “I think for some reason she resented that I was trying to make the best of it and not get all bitter like she was. She always threw that back at me, like I was some kind of slut who didn’t care that those pigs had had their way with us and disappeared and left us both with babies. But you have to understand, Herman, it wasn’t like that. It wasn’t like that at all.”

“Of course it wasn’t.” I had gotten the impression that she would try to make the best of whatever situation she might find herself in.

“I’m not sure,” Wendy said, “but I think it’s possible that she blamed me for . . . for everything.”

“You didn’t force her into that motel room.”

“No, not at all. And some of the stuff she said during that period, when our friendship was falling apart—it seemed that she wanted to get away from me because having me around was too much of a reminder of what happened. Too much of a reminder that those pigs had taken advantage of us.”

“As if having Amanda Lynn around wasn’t,” I said.

“One time I said something to her about needing each other for support. She nearly bit my head off.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. She said we didn’t need each other. She could get ‘*support*’ anywhere. And that’s how she said it—spitting it out, dripping with sarcasm. Did her best to make me feel more insignificant than a speck of dust.”

“That’s odd.”

“I thought about it for a long time. What I think is that she didn’t want to agree that we needed each other—that I needed her in particular, and she needed

me in particular—because in her view, the only reason to believe something like that would be that she thought the Hookie-Pookie story was true.”

Wendy and her parents raised the kid, little Dwight, as best they could. But it was tough going—much tougher than normal—because his behavior was so erratic. Wendy pointed out to me the place in Henry’s note that mentioned “subtle psychological differences,” and she was of the opinion that that had something to do with his problems. She didn’t know how to raise a Hookie-Pookie kid. Or a half-Hookie-Pookie kid.

“Maybe there’s no way to raise a half-Hookie-Pookie kid,” I said.

“That might be closer to the truth,” Wendy said.

One day she had found him sitting in his crib, holding his bottle out at arm’s length, babbling to it in baby talk. “He was jabbering away, very intensely. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought he was giving it a well-prepared lecture on the symbolism in *Moby-Dick*,” she said.

Wendy told me stories.

She told me the story of Dwight explaining to all the little girls in his kindergarten class where babies came from. Not surprisingly, the other parents were highly upset, and all the more so because he told them this: He said that babies are made by girls eating chocolate candy bars that boys had given them.

This was the day after he had brought chocolate candy bars for all the girls in the class.

When Wendy talked to him, it became apparent to her that this had not been a prank. He actually believed it. In his defense, the incident had not been a purposeful

attempt to impregnate girls. No, of all the things he might do, he would never do *that*. He had somehow come to this idea *after* giving the girls the candy, and was telling them about babies in an attempt to warn them.

There were rumblings of a lawsuit among the pissed-off parents, but nothing ever came of it. Dwight, however, was expelled.

And then there was the time Dwight was caught spray-painting graffiti on the side of his school building:

FIVE TWENTIETH CENTURY EVENTS OF ESCHATOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

1. The admission of Arizona as a U.S. state
2. A man named Thurston Owsley coughing up blood on September 23, 1939 in Dove Pass, Vermont
3. The invention of nylon.
4. The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy
5. The release (but not the production) of the movie *The Shining*

How does an eight-year-old come up with *that*?

And how did they know it was Dwight? Simple: He had been talking about someone named Thurston Owsley for several days before the graffiti appeared. The principal confronted him, and he admitted to it. He, Dwight, was defiant: "You can't prove me wrong! You can't prove me wrong!" He thought the reason the adults were upset was because they believed those statements were somehow incorrect.

Wendy had to pay to get the graffiti sandblasted off the building. This was soon, too soon, after some rather

large, unexpected car repair bills. All the work the adults had put into carefully devising a budget didn't mean much when they had a kid like Dwight running around.

He did a lot of smaller things that were, essentially, harmless but which nonetheless contributed to his ever-growing reputation as a strange kind of guy.

When he was twelve, Dwight turned cartwheels through the aisles at the corner drugstore.

Six months later, he sprinted through the same drugstore wearing a woman's purse upside-down on his head, like a hat, with the handles pulled down under his chin. He ran laps around the outer aisles, mumbling to himself, "Gotta get there, gotta get there."

At the age of sixteen, he was found crawling on the street, sniffing the pavement. Neighbors watched from their windows as Dwight repeatedly crawled a few feet, stopped, and gave the street a good, hefty sniff, much like a dog investigating a place to pee. Right down the center of the street. Fortunately, this was a lightly traveled residential street deep in the heart of American suburbia, so drivers were able to see him and drive around him easily. But still . . .

Wendy had kept a log of these incidents. She showed me a three-ring binder with about a hundred handwritten pages of short entries like this:

04/21/1990

Incident: Dwight vaulted over the sales counter at a McDonald's restaurant and tried to get the manager to dance with him.

Resolution: I apologized and promised he would never

come back.

04/24/1990

Incident: Dwight walked into a coffee shop and loudly announced that he had an appointment. He would not elaborate, and he refused to leave until he could meet with someone for this alleged appointment.

Resolution: I apologized to the manager and agreed that Dwight would never come back.

Paging through, one might get the impression that Dwight had been thrown out of half of all the walk-in businesses in San Francisco. Wendy thought it was likely that he had returned to a few—or considerably more than a few—of the places he was banned from, simply because he wouldn't have been able to keep track of where he was allowed to go and where he wasn't.

The first few entries had no dates. Wendy hadn't started the log until it became apparent that this was going to be an ongoing problem. At that point, she had to reconstitute previous incidents as well as she could from memory.

The handwritten log ended in mid-1993. That's when she got a computer. I wanted to ask for a copy of the log, but I was afraid I might be overstepping her boundaries.

"Do you want a copy?" she asked. "It's all on a big spreadsheet."

"If you don't mind," I said. "It would be extremely useful in my research."

At that, she swiveled around in her chair and sent an email with the spreadsheet attached to my university address.

I would have expected other kids to pick on someone

like Dwight. I would have expected that they would make fun of the weird guy and bully him. I would have been wrong. This wasn't a timid kid whose mother dressed him like a sissy and who reminded the teacher at the end of the day that she had forgotten to assign homework.

This was the kid who responded to an attempt to bully him by pushing the would-be bully to the ground, leapfrogging over him, turning around to face him, doing seven jumping jacks (counting them off as loudly as he could), shouting, "I'm a snake! You're a car! I'm a snake! You're a car!" and dashing away.

If you're a bully, how do you deal with a kid who does that?

You don't, that's how. Three days later, you're still trying to figure out why he did the jumping jacks. And after that, you'll have to figure out what the snake and car bit was all about.

It's not even fun to ridicule someone like that because it has no effect. A couple teachers told Wendy that some of the kids had tried taunting him and making fun of him, but they had quickly given up because he was oblivious. He apparently had no idea—not the slightest concept—that it was supposed to make him feel bad. They might as well have been talking about the weather.

Friends? Not quite. Other kids seemed to like him, mostly. But he was never "in sync" with what they were playing. He might start out all right, but would lose interest within minutes. Sometimes he sat there narrating what the other kids were doing, as if he were a play-by-play sports announcer. Other times he walked away and conducted an in-depth conversation with a speck of dust or somesuch. "What are you doing, Mr. Dust? Oh,

really? That's *fascinating*. What do you think of the election in France? Yes, yes. Me, too."

So the other kids lost interest in having him around. They weren't angry about what he did, but it didn't take them long to reach the point of saying, "Why bother?"

Wendy got married when Dwight was ten years old. "Barry was wonderful," she told me. Yes, wonderful. Already, I was gritting my teeth at what I perceived—strictly as an emotional reaction—to be a comparison that would make me look bad. Did Wendy think *I* was wonderful? Would she if she knew me better?

"Barry was wonderful," Wendy said. "He got along with Dwight very well. He took him places. Camping, fishing, hiking. They went to the movies. Barry took him to basketball games. Dwight really liked watching basketball.

"The problem was, Dwight's behavior got even worse when he wasn't doing something with Barry. I couldn't understand it. I had expected he would calm down, but no."

"That's strange," I said.

"One day he went leaping from rooftop to rooftop, all around the block. The houses were just far enough apart that you'd think he couldn't make it, but he did. No problem. Rooftop to rooftop. Bop, bop, bop. And he would spin around in circles like a top as he went across each roof. I watched him go across about four houses that way before he got out of sight."

"That must have been scary."

"Like you wouldn't believe. And some of the neighbors came out to watch. But no one knew what to do. One neighbor several houses down got a ladder and climbed up to wait for him, but Dwight turned around

and started back in the direction he had come from. Then, when the neighbor gave up and climbed down, Dwight turned around again.”

“So you had to wait for him to come down?”

“That’s all I could think of. He went around the block, came down, and that was that.

“I tried to talk to Barry about it. I told him, ‘Dwight’s behavior is getting more bizarre. More dangerous.’ He wouldn’t talk about it. He insisted it was my imagination.

“There were more incidents. Dwight was caught roller-skating along the Golden Gate Bridge on one foot while juggling bananas. He goose-stepped through a shopping mall with dozens of strips of raw bacon hanging from his clothes. I guess that one’s not dangerous, but somehow it doesn’t have the . . . charm . . . that his other antics had.”

“Raw bacon?”

“Raw bacon. I kept trying to talk to Barry, but he insisted the problem wasn’t getting any worse. Finally, he accused me of being jealous. He accused me of trying to poison their relationship.”

“That’s preposterous.”

“Sure it was. But that was all Barry would say about it. And meanwhile, my out-of-control son was getting more and more out of control. And, mind you, it was a ten-year-old boy doing all this.”

Wendy stopped and gazed into her teacup. “I know it’s not unusual to have an out-of-control child, but, my god, if only he could have been out of control in a normal way. If he had been doing drugs or shoplifting, I might have had a clue what to do about it. I would have at least known there were other parents going through the same thing.”

“But no other parents had kids who went leaping from housetop to housetop all the way around the block,” I said.

“Exactly. I felt so helpless and alone. Barry recognized the problem, but he refused to admit that it was serious. ‘Boys will be boys,’ he said.

“Finally, I filed for divorce. I had to get Dwight away from him.”

“How did Dwight take it?”

“He took it hard at first. Sat in his room and moped. But at least he wasn’t running around asking school buses to be in his movie.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, that was another one, when Barry was still around. One Saturday afternoon, a security guard at the county school bus compound caught Dwight running around asking the buses to be in a movie he was going to produce.” The guard was puzzled; the compound was fenced-in and the gate padlocked. It hadn’t been opened. How had Dwight gotten in? Who knows? They couldn’t get a coherent story out of him.

Inasmuch as the school board was familiar with Dwight and the way he operated, and since he hadn’t damaged anything, and since they had other, more pressing business to tend to, they dropped the matter—but not before making Wendy come to a meeting during which they did a lot of indignant huffing and puffing and harrumphing and telling her emphatically that she had to CONTROL THAT KID.

Fortunately, after Barry was gone Wendy was able to keep the boy on the right side of the law. Mostly. He had a few episodes, occasionally, involving minor vandalism. In an incident reminiscent of the eschatological

graffiti on the school building, he struck a bank one night with bright orange spray paint:

Tape, Key to the Future
by Dwight Arnold Toshman

One of the most overlooked scientific discoveries in modern history must be the beneficial effects of tape. For example:

- 1. Placing a two-to-three-inch length of tape on the side of a plastic food container can lengthen the refrigerated shelf life of the food inside by as much as 15 percent.*
- 2. Placing a five-inch length of tape on the inside of a car tire will help it maintain its air pressure well enough to allow the owner to wait 40 to 50 percent longer before adding more air.*
- 3. Placing a three-inch length of tape on one's forehead enhances concentration. Willis McDudd, a chess master in the early 1930's, was always seen with a strip of tape on his face during tournaments. People thought he was eccentric. HA! Little did they know!*
- 4. Several rock and roll bands in the sixties and into the seventies were known to place a strip of tape along the entire back of each guitar neck before a performance or recording session. For years, many believed this had something to do with facilitating the movement of one's hand up and down the neck, or with protecting the instrument from the oil on the player's skin. However, certain highly credible sources indicate that the tape actually helps the guitar stay in tune longer, and in some cases enhances the tone. It's believed that at least two-thirds of the musicians who played at Woodstock used tape. For some reason, in the late 70's this practice*

began to fall out of favor and was practically unknown by 1980, even among musicians who had regularly used it.

5. A one-inch piece of tape applied to the barrel of a camera lens will enhance the sharpness of focus.

At this point the essay, if it may be called such, stopped. It wasn't clear whether this was all Dwight had intended to write or if he had been unable to finish for some reason—it certainly didn't seem that it came to any sort of actual conclusion, but then again, who expects graffiti to have a beginning, middle and end? Who would expect Dwight Arnold Toshman, the Hookie-Pookie Man, to write something that comes to a conclusion?

Finished or not, his name—his *byline*—led police right to Wendy's front door. More cleanup bills.

When Dwight was a sophomore in high school, the football coach called Wendy. He, the coach, was aware of Dwight's little stunts, and it was his opinion that some of them showed a fairly impressive level of athleticism. "Would you consider letting him try out for the football team?" the coach asked.

"You understand, don't you, that his behavior is, uh, shall we say . . ."

"Erratic? Eccentric?"

"Yes," Wendy said. "That's it. Both words. Do you know him well enough to have an opinion about whether he's capable of playing?"

"I'll admit straight-up that I don't. But I'd like to find out."

Fair enough, Wendy thought. It wasn't as if playing football would make it more likely that Dwight would do

something disastrous. Actually, it might be good for him to do something structured, to be part of a team and play a role and go to practice regularly. So why not let him try? That is to say, if he wanted to.

That was Wendy's dad's opinion, anyway. He was ecstatic at the thought of the boy doing something *normal*.

Wendy's mom, on the other hand . . . "He'll get hurt. You know Judy Penleavy . . . her boy Roger got his neck broken in a game, and now he has to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. You don't want that to happen to Dwight, do you?"

"Oh, hell, Irma," Wendy's dad said. "The boy roller skated on top of the retaining wall that runs next to the interstate last week. He could have fallen thirty feet onto the pavement, maybe in front of an eighteen-wheeler. How is football going to be more dangerous than that?"

Dwight didn't know much about football. So when Saturday came around, Wendy and her dad sat him down in front of the television set, and they watched a college game, Virginia at Georgia Tech. Mr. Toshman explained the rules as the game progressed.

Dwight thought it was pretty cool.

"Would you like to play football?" Wendy asked at halftime.

"Sure, but don't we need more people?"

"No, not us. Mr. Heffinger, the football coach at your school, called me and asked if you wanted to try out for the team. He thinks you might be good at it. You could play in real games against other schools."

"That sounds like fun."

"It would be. But before you can play in a real game,

you have to go to practice and prove to Coach Heffinger that you're really good enough."

"I think I can."

Dwight showed up at football practice wearing sweats and a look of uncertainty. Coach Heffinger greeted him warmly and stood next to him, making enthusiastic comments and explaining what was going on while they watched some of the guys run a few plays.

"What do you think, Dwight? Want to try it?"

"Okay. What do I do?"

"I see you're all ready to go. That's what I like." But first, the coach had Dwight do some warm-ups, then timed him in the 40-yard dash: 4.1 seconds.

Heffinger ran Dwight through some drills and watched with utmost approval. "The kid looked pretty good out there," he later told Wendy. Heffinger demonstrated some basic techniques, such as how a running back takes a hand-off from the quarterback. And so on. He quizzed Dwight on the rules to make sure he had a good idea of how things were supposed to work out there on the field.

Finally, he was ready to put Dwight in amongst the other guys. He lined them up, offense and defense, with Dwight at running back. He had them walk through a play in slow motion, to give Dwight an idea of what was going to happen. The ball went into play, and the quarterback handed off to him. Dwight took it with extremely careful attention to the technique Heffinger had shown him. The defensive linemen obligingly let the offensive linemen open up a wide, wide hole. Dwight sauntered through, and after a six-yard gain one of the defensive backs, in slow motion, caught him with what, in any other context, would have looked like a sort of

brotherly hug.

The coach blew his whistle. "Okay, guys, that's good," he said. "I think you have the idea, Dwight."

They tried it a couple more times in slow motion, to make sure, then Heffinger wanted to try one for real. "Are you ready, Dwight?" he asked. "This time, everyone's going to be running fast and hitting hard. It'll be like a real game."

"I'm ready," Dwight said.

They lined up, the quarterback called signals, and the center snapped it to him. The quarterback handed the ball to Dwight. Dwight stood there. Two defensive linemen converged on him. "They looked like a couple sumo wrestlers, with Dwight caught in the middle," Heffinger told Wendy. "They hit him at the same time. I swear I saw a huge cloud of dust whoosh out suddenly, like an explosion. I know it couldn't have happened like that, but that's how I remember it: A huge cloud of dust billowing out. After it blew away, there was Dwight on the ground, flat on his back. And one of the defensive players was running down the field with the ball. Dwight had fumbled."

Dwight was ready to quit, right then and there. "You weren't ready that time," Heffinger told him. "You have to be mentally prepared." Heffinger pointed to his head. "It's all in here. Now that you've been hit, you know what it's like. It'll be easier from now on."

Dwight let the coach talk him into trying again. He, Dwight, thought about what the hit had been like and tried to prepare himself mentally.

They lined up, and the play started. Once again, Dwight took the ball and stood still. Only one guy got to him this time, but he laid him out "as if Dwight had insulted his mother," Heffinger told Wendy.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Dwight said, flat on his back looking up at the sky.

“At least you gave it a shot,” Heffinger said. He was afraid of trying to get Dwight to try it again. He considered it fortunate for all concerned that Dwight hadn’t gotten hurt.

Wendy was concerned that Dwight would see his failure as some sort of monumental setback, that it might send him into a tailspin of existential dread, or something like that. She expected an onslaught of bizarre escapades, each one weirder and more spectacular than all the others put together. And yet, days went by with nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, he expressed some relief that he wasn’t going to have to deal with football anymore.

And then, after about a week, another episode, well within normal parameters:

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Incident: Neighbors across the street came home from the movies and found Dwight sleeping on their front porch, surrounded by dozens of stuffed animals.

Resolution: None needed. They thought it was funny.

Wendy had to wonder how things were going for Melanie and Amanda Lynn. The problem was that by the time she got around to thinking she should try to re-establish contact with her old friend, her old friend wasn’t reachable. She had moved away from the last address Wendy knew about. The trail was cold. Cold? No, that’s not the right way to put it. There was no trail at all, be it hot, cold or lukewarm.

Regarding Dwight, Wendy consulted doctors and psychologists and child rearing experts. She read books and listened to radio call-in shows. After getting the computer, she tried web sites and Internet message boards.

And yes, there were diagnoses and prescriptions and advice, lots of advice. Nothing made a bit of difference (not that she had any of the prescriptions filled; she figured the boy had enough problems without his mother dosing him up on drugs). She didn't think anything would help because she was pretty sure the Hookie-Pookie Planet thing was the root of the problem. Something in the boy's brain . . . wasn't human.

And there was no way to get advice about that. Wendy wasn't about to tell a doctor her child was the result of a youthful fling with a visitor from another planet who appeared to be an Earthling. She herself would have ended up the patient!

What kind of replies would you get if you were to post a question on a message board asking for advice on raising a half-space-alien child? It might be fun to see the creative replies, but it certainly wouldn't be, shall we say, *useful*.

I could see the bind she was in. The only reason she tried any of the stuff she tried, anyway, was because she felt the need to try *something*.

Wendy told me about the night he was at the Thorndike station. He had been walking around, and passing the station, he saw a man pull up to a gas pump, get out of his car, and go inside.

Dwight thought it would be a good idea to ask the man to take him home. So, while the man was inside, Dwight ambled over to his car, got in on the passenger side, and sat waiting.

“I’m sure Dwight had no funny business in mind,” Wendy said, “but what would some man who had never seen him before think?”

He didn’t know what to think. He approached the window and said to Dwight, “Hey, buddy, I think you got the wrong car.” He tried to be nice about it. He didn’t see any reason to get confrontational unless he had to.

“If Dwight had gotten out of the car then, everything would have been okay,” Wendy said.

Instead, he looked at the guy and said, “Is this your car?”

“Yes.”

“Then I have the right car.”

“What do you want?”

“Don’t you know?”

“How would I know? I’ve never seen you before.” He was trying his best to be nice.

“I want to go home with you.”

The man didn’t know what to make of that. So he said, “You can’t. You have to get out of the car.”

“But if I get out of the car, I can’t go home with you.”

“Look, son, I don’t want to get mean, but I’m not taking you home. You’re going to have to get out of the car.”

Dwight went wide-eyed and looked at the man for a moment, then began screaming hysterically. The man backed away, pulled out his cell phone, and called the police. He explained later that ordinarily, he wouldn’t have been intimidated by Dwight. He didn’t doubt his physical ability to handle Dwight “mano a mano,” if you want to call it that (and, indeed, the man had a formidable look, Wendy said). But this wasn’t an ordinary situation. “People are crazy these days,” he said. “You never know. He might have had a gun. He sure as hell

was weird.”

Three police cars arrived. The cops approached cautiously, guns drawn, and ordered Dwight out of the car with many threats.

Dwight didn't understand any of it.

Wendy found herself dragged out of bed, from a sound sleep, at three in the morning. She and Irma went to the Thorndike station and talked to the police and the manager, who had to get his boss on the phone because of the hubbub.

Finally, at the end of it all, Irma—with her loving, grandmotherly demeanor—was able to extract Dwight from the situation without any legal problem—just in time for Wendy to get to work at eight o'clock.

“I suspect the reason the police didn't come down harder on him was because he provided them with a stream of good stories,” Wendy said.

A question that had been lurking in the back of my mind found its way out: “How does Dwight feel about being . . . unique?”

Wendy gave me a sad smile. “I guess he started becoming aware of it when he was six or seven. I mean, he was a bright kid. A very bright kid.”

“Sure,” I said.

“He asked me about it. And it was . . . interesting, the way he asked. He said, ‘Mommy, should I try to be like the other kids?’ Not ‘Mommy, why am I different?’ or ‘Mommy, how can I be like the other kids?’ It was, ‘Should I try to be like them?’”

“As if he was going to skip over the whys and wherefores and get right down to the business of dealing with it.”

“Sort of like that. We talked about it. I explained that he was never going to be like the other kids, no

matter what he did or how hard he tried. So he needed to find a way to be happy with who he was. And it might be terribly, terribly hard, but that was the only way. No one has ever been happy trying to be something they're not."

"I think that was a good thing to tell him."

"He worked on it. He worked on it as hard as he could, all the time he lived at home. And I would suppose he's continued working on it to this day. It really got to him sometimes, though. One Saturday we were in the park, and he was watching a church group play softball. He watched for a long time. I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so sad. I cried my eyes out that night."

A church group? "I apologize if I'm out of line asking, but did you try joining a church? They probably would have been happy to accept him as he was. Reach out to him and include him."

"I thought they would have tried to teach him some ideas I didn't want him to have in his head."

"Oh? Are you an atheist?"

"It's more like this: Religious people generally believe their problems are God's will, that it's part of His plan, a test for them to overcome."

"I suppose they do."

"The way I see it, it would be unspeakably cruel to teach Dwight—a confused little kid who was different, and knew he was different, and was miserable because of it, and had no clue what to do about it and no hope of overcoming it—it would be cruel beyond description to teach him that the most powerful being in the universe *wanted* him, for some reason, to be that way."

Dwight Begins his Quest

One day, when Dwight was twenty, Wendy was going through some old papers. He walked into the room as she was looking at one of Melanie's Christmas cards.

"What's that?" he asked.

And that's when it hit her. He deserved to know the truth, and he was old enough to understand.

He would undoubtedly believe it.

Wendy gave it to him straight—or mostly straight. She described Henry only as a boyfriend who had been very nice but who had to leave after a short time. That was all he really needed to know about that.

But otherwise, she gave it to him straight. She told Dwight about the note Henry had left and the psychological differences (whatever they might be) mentioned therein. She explained that those differences were undoubtedly the root of all his behavioral problems.

She told him about Melanie and Amanda Lynn, and that Amanda Lynn's father was also a man from the Hookie-Pookie Planet.

At that, Dwight perked up. "She's like me?" he said.

Wendy had never considered that angle. Yes, yes, Amanda Lynn would be just like him! "That's right," she said.

“Then I have to go find her.”

“I don’t have a clue where she might be.”

“I’ll find her.”

Wendy talked Dwight out of leaving immediately. She hired a private detective, in the hope that he could find Amanda Lynn. It was a stiff financial hit—those guys don’t come cheap—but if he could produce results, it would be more than worthwhile.

Of course, she realized that no matter what the results of the investigation might be, Dwight was going to end up leaving home—either to go live with Amanda Lynn or to strike out into the world in search of her.

Wendy, along with her parents, helped Dwight get ready. They bought him a backpack and some new clothes to get him started. They got him a prepaid debit card, and they planned to keep it loaded with as much money as they could, to help him out. “Please, please, please, make sure you don’t lose it,” Wendy implored.

“I won’t lose it,” Dwight said.

They spent days drilling him on social norms and the basic niceties of dealing with people, in a desperate attempt to keep him out of trouble. Yeah, Wendy had spent twenty years trying to teach him this stuff, with limited success, but the pressure was on now. She hated to think what might happen if Dwight were found crawling down the middle of a street sniffing the pavement in a less tolerant neighborhood. She hated to think what might happen if he needed someone to talk him out of trouble at a gas station in the middle of the night, hundreds of miles away from grandma. She hated to think what might happen if he were caught spray painting a review of *Don Quixote* on the side of a shopping mall.

So they reviewed and reviewed, and Wendy quizzed Dwight, hour after hour, and he never consistently gave all the right answers. She had doubts about the wisdom of letting her child go out on his own looking for . . . someone he would probably never find.

But even more, she doubted the wisdom of not letting him. Wendy understood that he had to do it. "This was the best thing for him," her mother told her, "no matter how it might end up."

After three weeks, the detective submitted his report. He had found nothing. He shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm terribly sorry. I'm one of the best there is at finding people. But this . . . I have no clue. It's almost as if she never existed."

"You did your best," Wendy said.

And so, when Dwight walked out the front door on a sunny, fifty-degree day in September, he was off on a search. He was beginning a quest, if you want to put it that way. Before he was out of sight, Wendy had already thought of every conceivable disaster, and she was sure that every single one of them was going to happen.

"I haven't heard from him since," she said. "I've heard *about* him, though."

I flew back to Alabama on the fourteenth. The next day, Dwight's emergency room vomiting case was resolved with the agreement that he leave town and never come back. Everyone—the hospital administration, the patient, the prosecutor, the judge—understood that the incident had been nothing more than a lapse in judgment by a guy who didn't have very good judgment to begin with. No actual harm was done, and left to his

own devices, Dwight was likely to leave town and never come back, regardless of any legal restraints.

I managed to be at the police station when they released him. Outside, we sat in my car looking at the sunshine. “You have to leave town,” I said.

“I guess I do.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Which direction are you going?”

“Any direction you want.”

“I don’t know what direction I want.”

“How do you usually decide where to go?”

Dwight got out of the car and walked over to a tree at the edge of the parking lot. He picked up a stick about two feet long and tossed it back over his shoulder. “Go in the direction the stick is pointing,” he said.

I looked. The stick was lying on the pavement more-or-less parallel to the front of the police station. “It’s pointing in two directions,” I said.

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

And so, with the decision left up to me, I turned right when we left the parking lot.

But it didn’t matter which way the stick pointed. Since Dwight didn’t know where he wanted to go, my plan was to head back home and see if I could get him to stay with me for a while. I suspected he would rather keep moving, but I was hoping he would welcome the opportunity to sit in a warm, dry, friendly house for a few days and eat some good, home cooking—and to do all this with no urge to sleep on the roof.

I wondered if Fran could provide the home cooking. I knew I couldn’t.