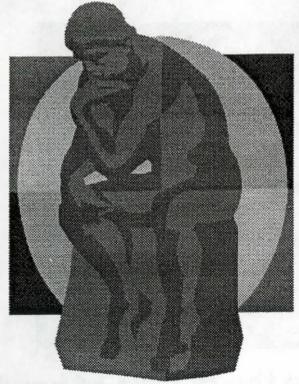


# TILT



**JOE REACHES FOR THE RE-REHEATED BREAD SET AT HIS TABLE. IT CRUNCHES AND BENDS BENEATH A UTENSIL POSING AS A STEAK KNIFE. CRUMBS SPILL ONTO THE MAROON TABLECLOTH THAT WAS OBVIOUSLY MEANT TO HIDE THE DROPPINGS OF A DINNER GONE WRONG. WITH A JERK OF AGITATION, JOE RIPS HIS BREAD INTO A THIRD AND THEN PROCEEDS TOWARDS THE BUTTER. HE LOOKS, ALYZES, AND PLANS HIS**



**attack by dipping the tip of his knife into the butter and then spreading a small amount over his bread. This process is repeated four more times and each time Joe gawks at his bread and re-thinks his strategy.**



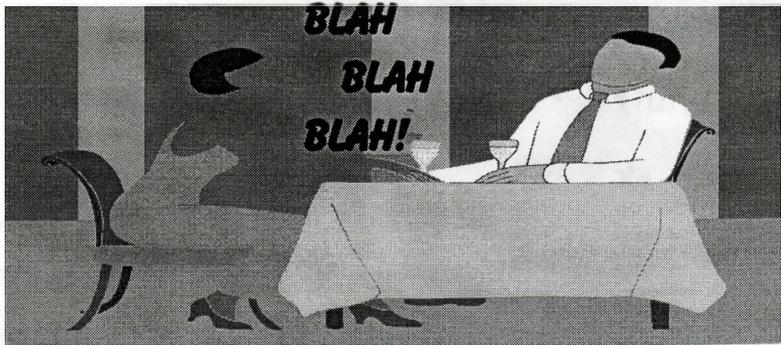
A waiter decked out in almost the same attire as Joe, white collared shirt and black pants, approaches Joe's table. He nonchalantly takes away the second place setting, and in a mix of an Italian and French accent asks, "Mr. Tampetzi, what would be your choice tonight?"

In a clear and assertive voice, Joe replies, "Oh, I think I'll have the filet mignon again. And don't forget, no dressing on the salad." He then dives into the second third of the bread.



Looking around, he observes the other tables. Seated behind him is a young couple quarrelling over wedding arrangements. He's tempted to turn around to see exactly what's going on, but keeps his eyes forward, pretending to be unaware of the conversation or scene they're making. Joe continually diverts his eyes until he realizes they can't see where he's looking if they're seated behind him.

So he stares at the crumb infested tablecloth.



A feminine voice from behind is complaining over her engagement ring.

“I don’t understand why you picked three stones instead of one big stone. I’m sure it would have been the same price, too. Everyone says it’s a beautiful ring, but I know they’re really thinking about what a cheapskate my fiancé is. You know maybe I should have married a doctor...or a lawyer...” Her voice becomes a monotone and the only sound Joe hears is “Wa wa wa,” as he imagines the teacher from all the Charlie Brown episodes.

Joe glances down at his hands, stretches his fingers out, and then curls each one under his thumb in an attempt to get a good crack. All but his left ring finger cracks, mostly because it doesn’t bend completely. There fused between skin, hair, and calluses, lay eleven years of tarnish on a band of lemon and

ivory hues. Sunken into the crevices of his forefinger, the band acts like a binding harness to all blood trying to flow from first joint to second and third. So compressed is the tissue underneath this girdle that when once removed five years prior, a cherry circle remained intact. He starts to think he should have just ordered a salad instead.

Memories flood the restaurant away and Joe feels as if he is now standing in an airport eleven years ago.



“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” says Miriam, an attractive blonde, to a slender Joe with oversized glasses.

“Why not? I think you’re just afraid of flying,” he replies in a joking manner, knowing rather well that she had been a flight attendant for five years.

Miriam stretches her fingers and turns to Joe, who is sitting to the right of her in the airport terminal.

“And to think, babe, the last time I was on an airplane was ten years ago when you swept me off my feet on a

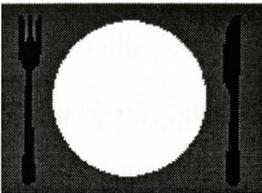
red-eye from New York to Paris. I'm surprised through my baggy eyes and sweaty hair you managed to see the beauty in me. Now look at us, there's no turning back now."

Joe knows exactly what Miriam means; she was trying to be cute, but he got the hint. It only took ten years of commitment for her to finally convince him to buy wedding rings. Even after all those years he still feels they don't trust one another enough to make a vow of for better and for worst. No matter how much they can lie and pretend things are alright, he still feels she is a gold digger and she still feels he is a cheater. Obviously nothing has changed, Joe thinks to himself.

Soon after their arrival in JFK International Airport, Joe and Miriam scurry over to the infamous Tiffany's in New York City and pick out the ring of Miriam's choice.

**Once again, Joe is sitting alone at his table. He tries to shake off the sunken and lonely feeling in his chest. His head whirls around and the couple seated behind him has already left. He figures they had to be somewhere else, and he is envious of the couple. He too has somewhere else to be, but nowhere Mississippi is far from it.**

**Just as Joe checks his watch with impatience, the waiter approaches with his dinner and now he has some-**



where else to be, but nowhere Mississippi is far from it.

Just as Joe checks his watch with impatience, the waiter approaches with his dinner and now he has something to concentrate on. With his right hand he picks up a real steak knife that arrived along his entrée and with his left he grabs a fork. With a great deal of intent he begins his meal and carefully calculates each sliver just as he did with the bread prior. Before a bite reaches his mouth, he takes another glimpse around the room.

This time, his attention settles on a family huddled to his immediate right. Their table seats four and each seat is filled. A woman in a red, capped-sleeve dress is cutting up a breast of chicken for a little girl in a plaid jumper and knee-highs. A gentleman separates the young girl from an older boy who is reading a science fiction book at the table. He knows well the trilogy the boy is reading, and considers picking up the next book in the series for



his little boy at the airport next week, if he did in fact return home. He continues to observe the interactions taking place and thinks back to a few weeks ago when he too sat at a full table of four.

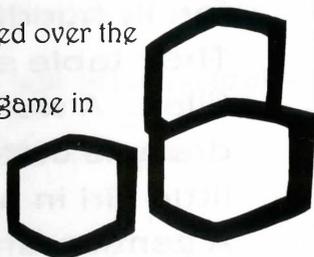
"You children need to stop playing games right now. You're embarrassing me," Miriam whispers sternly to her family in an upscale restaurant nestled in the affluence of Boston, Massachusetts.

Joe sheepishly replies, "Aw, come on sweetie. We'll try to keep it down."

"Please, mommy!" scream the little ones in unison.

"Fine. I swear sometimes I think I have three children," says Miriam as she gives in as graciously as she can.

This time in particular she's distressed over the Sugar Game, as the family calls it. This is a game in which players are seated at opposite sides of the table. One player takes a packet of sugar and slides it across the table in hopes of having it land on the edge. If this occurs, the opposing player has to flip the packet of sugar up off the surface and if completed successfully, the point goes to the player who slid the sugar across. The rules go more in-depth and explain what happens when interference occurs on the playing surface and how to avoid flying sugar to neighboring tables. Joe loves the way the kids get so involved in the game, creating Sugar Cheers and victory dances. Once at the Sugar Superbowl, Miriam even got involved.



The busboy passes and ice water clinks into Joe's empty glass. He reaches over to soothe his now parched throat and chapped lips. On the realization he hasn't eaten any food yet, he attempts to concentrate a third time on the task at hand. However, with a twist of his wrist he quickly checks the time and is astonished to see an hour has passed. He hopes it's not too late to call home and pushes away from the table.

While rushing out of the restaurant, Joe retrieves his polished cell phone from his breast pocket and punches a combination of memorized digits. The phone rings twice and he grips the phone as tight as the band on his left hand will allow. As the phone continues to ring he thinks back to the night he left home.

"Daddy! Please don't go!" says Joe's three year old daughter dressed in pink Barbie pajamas.

"Sarah, you know I don't have a choice. Daddy needs to go to work."

"No you don't! You promised to watch my baseball game tomorrow," cries Joe's other child, Andy, who has just woken from his bed.

"Miriam, could you help me here? It's late and I have to leave."

“Joe, you’re on your own with this one. You could have easily handed this case to Michael, or someone else. It’s not fair for you to leave last minute on your family, time after time.”

“Well I didn’t think the kids would understand, but you, Miriam, I would have thought you liked this big house and the diamonds around your neck. If you want me to cut down on work, maybe you could offer to get a job instead of sitting at home all day bitching that I’m never here.”

The children listen in astonishment as their parents quarrel openly in front of them.

“Forget this, I’m leaving. You better hope I come home after the trial. If not, say goodbye to Boston and your Tiffany’s collection.”



Joe’s phone continues to ring loudly, vibrating through his right eardrum. He tries to shake off the uneasy feeling settled at the bottom of his stomach and whispers into his hand held phone,

“Pick up, pick up”, as if it’s listening. He’s gotten into fights with Miriam millions of times before, but this one is different. Since his two-week trip to nowhere Mississippi, they haven’t spoken, except for the times he’s called home to talk to the children. Even at that, their conversations were less than pleasant and two sentences apiece. Even though Miriam and Joe aren’t on the best of terms, it’s not their relationship that worries him the most. He’s worried about the effects their continuous bickering will have on their impressionable children.

Joe observes a lady trying to sell flowers outside the restaurant, where he is standing. Finally, his phone stops



ringing and Joe hears rustling and fumbling on the other end of the phone. "Hello? Hello?" Joe asks hesitantly. The sound of a phone dropping to a tiled floor is heard, and then a clink as if someone has picked it up carelessly.

"Hi, my name's Sarah!" shouts an excited little voice into the receiver.

"Sarah, honey, it's Daddy."

"Oh, Daddy! Guess what...Andy's bein' mean to me....he, he said that Barbies were for girls."

"Sarah, you are a girl."

There's a pause on the phone, and Sarah replies, "Yeah, I know."

Joe shifts his weight to the left and places his hand on an already twisted hip. "So...anything new at home? How are Mommy and the pets?"

"Rufus skwatched me so,so... Mommy put him owtside. Then Andy ate

w-watermelon seed and I told him he was dumb and that watermelons are gonna gwow in his tummy now. Right, Daddy?"

"Well, I don't know about that, silly. Is Mommy home? Can you put Mommy on the phone?"

"Okie dokie." Joe hears the familiar clunk of a phone dropping to a tiled floor and in the background the yell of a three year old.

"Mommy! Mommy! MOMMY!" Sarah's little foot-steps run toward the phone and she picks it up hastily again.

"She's busy."

Joe expected this. "Hm...what's she doing?" The phone drops a third time and Joe hears Sarah yelping again.

"What are you doing, Mommy?" There's silence. "I SAID, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHAT? Oh, kay!"

Impatiently waiting, Joe remembers he forgot to pay the check inside the restaurant. Now that his right arm has gone completely numb, Joe shifts his cell phone to his left ear. He wonders why conversations with toddlers always go in slow motion.

Sarah picks up the phone and says, "She's washin her hair. It must be d-dirty."



**"Washing her hair, huh?"** Joe's voice breaks off angrily and he mutters a few choice words. **"Well, why don't you go tell Maxxy that she should rinse the bullshit out of it, too."** There's a pause and Joe wishes he could take back his irritated reply. Here he is worrying about the influence his children are under, and he's openly giving his children curse words to speak to their mother.

**"Uhm...okie dokie, I'll tell her to keep washin."** Before Joe has a chance to pull Sarah back onto the phone, she drops the receiver with another loud clank. Perspiration begins to gather at Joe's brow and his cheeks grow to a swollen strawberry color. The uneasy feeling in his



stomach that he's been trying to forget has turned into full blown heartburn and Joe thinks to himself, *Now I'm in for it.*

This time Joe hears heavy footsteps approach the receiver on the other end of the phone. He pictures Godzilla thumping down New York City ready to eat all unsuspecting men in sight.

In a Tasmanian devil voice, Miriam picks up the phone and says, **"YOU SAID WHAT?!"**

Joe gulps. **"Hi, honey. Uhm, haven't spoken in awhile."** Joe straightens his back and takes a deep breath, reconquering his masculinity. In a sarcastic tone he says, **"I thought you were washing your hair."**



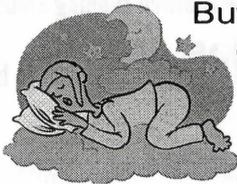
“What do you want?”

Joe can't believe she's still mad. Of course it's okay for him to still be mad, but he didn't do anything wrong. Here he is working twelve-hour days defending an obviously guilty drug dealer just so she can take his money and put it towards the “Miriam fund,” a fund that she sees as an endless pot of gold all for her taking. This fund consists of a red Porsche GT2 with light tan interior and custom made hubcaps, three furs in a variety of colors and a fake fur for her humanitarian days, gym equipment for her gymnasium sized fitness center that had to be built in Joe's old basketball court, and two different types of tanning beds located in the master bathroom. All this is just a sample of Miriam's various expenditures, not including the weekly manicure, pedicure, facial, massage, and seaweed wrap. And since Miriam is so busy maintaining such a busy lifestyle, Joe is also paying a chef, personal trainer, and two maids, one of which is supposed to be a nanny, to make Miriam's life just a little bit more luxurious.

“Hello? What do you want, Joe?” Miriam's words cut through Joe's resentment like a knife. He thinks of how her voice sounds more and more like a dying pig everyday. Rage streams into his cheeks as he continues to think about what he really wants to say to her.

*I want you to get your hands out of my pockets and take care of the children, or, God forbid, get a job! You have such a tough life*

*primping and pampering yourself like Queen of the Jampetzi's, when all I want is for you to be a real human being with real human flaws. For once I'd like to see you without your makeup on when I get home, have a stain on your shirt, or eat a piece of cake at someone's birthday. Even to see you reading a story to our children would make my day and my work feel a little more worthwhile. Instead I'm your slave with "yes dears" and "whatever you say honey"... and the one time I stand up to you and you see I have a backbone, two weeks later you're still talking to me like you have a stick up your ass.*



But Joe remains silent, only to dream of the reaction Miriam would have if he ever did say that.

"Look, Miriam, I don't think it's healthy for us to fight around the kids like this. It's not right for Sarah to be the interpreter between us."

"I'm not the one who left town, Joseph." Boy, she knew how to zing it to him. Soon she'll be calling him Joseph Zachary Tampetzi like his mom always did.

"I didn't leave home because I wanted to. This is my job, Miriam. Please understand." Joe starts to pace in front of the restaurant like he's taking an important business call.

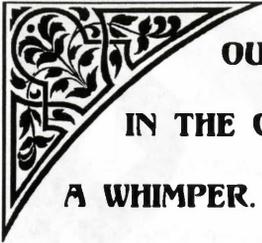
“Fine. I understand. I understand you left me to take care of Andy and Sarah by myself. Do you know that Helga is sick? She hasn’t been able to take the kids to the park all week. It’s been very crazy here. Not only are the kids running around like maniacs, but tomorrow I’m having the girls over for brunch and I can’t imagine what kind of humiliation I’m going to be put through. You have absolutely no idea, Joseph Zachary, so you should try to understand my situation instead of feeling sorry for yourself.”

Joe wonders how all of a sudden their quarrel about work became an argument over having children. “Miriam, I’ll be home in a week or so. I’m going through stress, too, ya know. You try wearing a suit all day defending killers, rapists, and child molesters, and then returning to an empty hotel room missing the very thing you’re complaining about right now. I wish I could see the children running around like maniacs. I wish I could take them to the park instead of Helga. I do want to be there...honey?”

“Yea, I’m here... Joseph, I have to go. Sarah is bothering me.” Joe listens carefully and doesn’t hear anything but a television in the background. “Okay, go ahead. I have to finish dinner anyway. Can I call tomorrow?”

“I guess, if I’m here. Goodbye!” Joe is still holding his cell phone close to his ear pretending she didn’t just hang up on him. He whispers bye to the air and puts the phone back into his chest pocket.

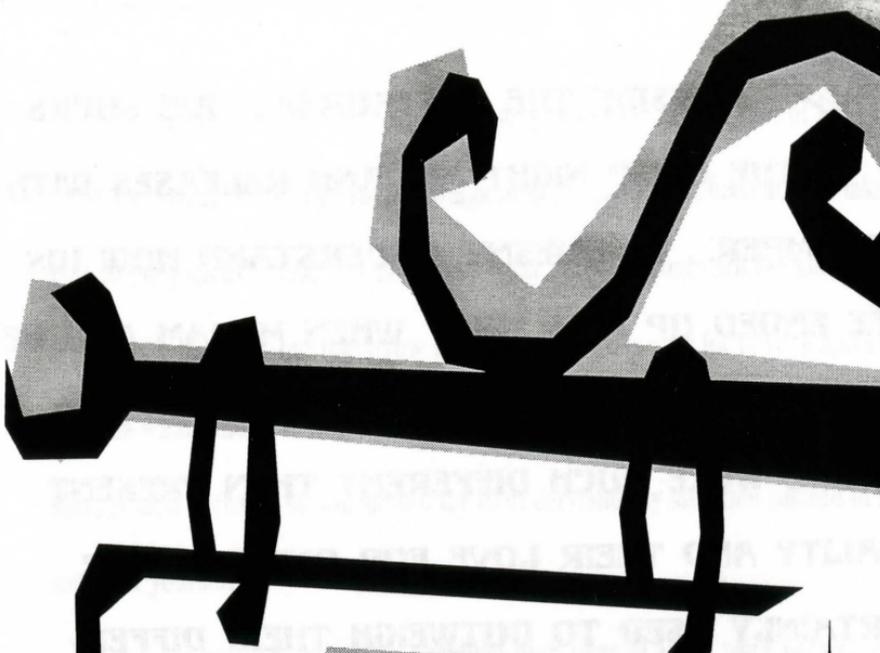




**OUTSIDE THE RESTAURANT, JOE SUCKS  
IN THE CRISP NIGHT AIR AND RELEASES WITH  
A WHIMPER. HE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND HOW HIS  
LIFE ENDED UP LIKE THIS. WHEN MIRIAM AND HE  
FIRST GOT TOGETHER, THEIR DREAMS FOR THE  
FUTURE WERE MUCH DIFFERENT THEN PRESENT  
REALITY AND THEIR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER  
CERTAINLY USED TO OUTWEIGH THEIR DIFFER-  
ENCES.**

**AS JOE REENTERS THE RESTAURANT, THE  
SWOOSH OF THE AIR CONDITIONER AGAINST HIS  
CHEEKS REMINDS HIM OF A DAY FOURTEEN  
YEARS AGO WHEN HE AND MIRIAM HAD A  
PICNIC AT A LOCAL PARK.**

*"Oh Jester," a pet name Miriam crowned Joe before  
Andy and Sarah were born, "don't be naïve, I'm not going to  
be able to have a child a year. I understand you want a big  
family, but you try pushing out ten little bodies and still  
having a figure like this." Joe knows she's only joking, and  
admires Miriam as she struts her curvy 120 pound body in a  
circle as if she was posing on a runway. He then*



scoops her up into his arms and squeezes her tight, swaying her body back and forth with his.

“So what if you’ll gain some weight, maybe even get a little looser in areas; I’ll still love you. And so what if you might get droopy around your assets and wrinkles will start to show your age; you know I’ll love you. And who cares if spots turn up on your skin and...” Miriam quickly covers Joe’s mouth in a playful manner with a hand she managed to get free from his manly bear hug.

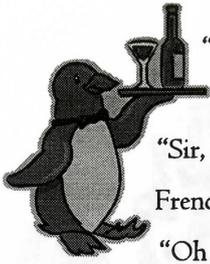
Underneath her hand, Joe continues to talk and nibbles on Miriam's palm.

"Ouch! You devil, you're gonna get it," Miriam announces as she breaks free from Joe and grabs his car keys from his left pocket.

Miriam runs whimsically away from Joe screeching, "I hope you don't mind if I borrow your car for awhile, honzy!"

"Miriam, you wait and see. As my motto goes, bare foot and pregnant, baby!" Joe yells across the park as he chases Miriam who runs even faster after hearing his last comment.





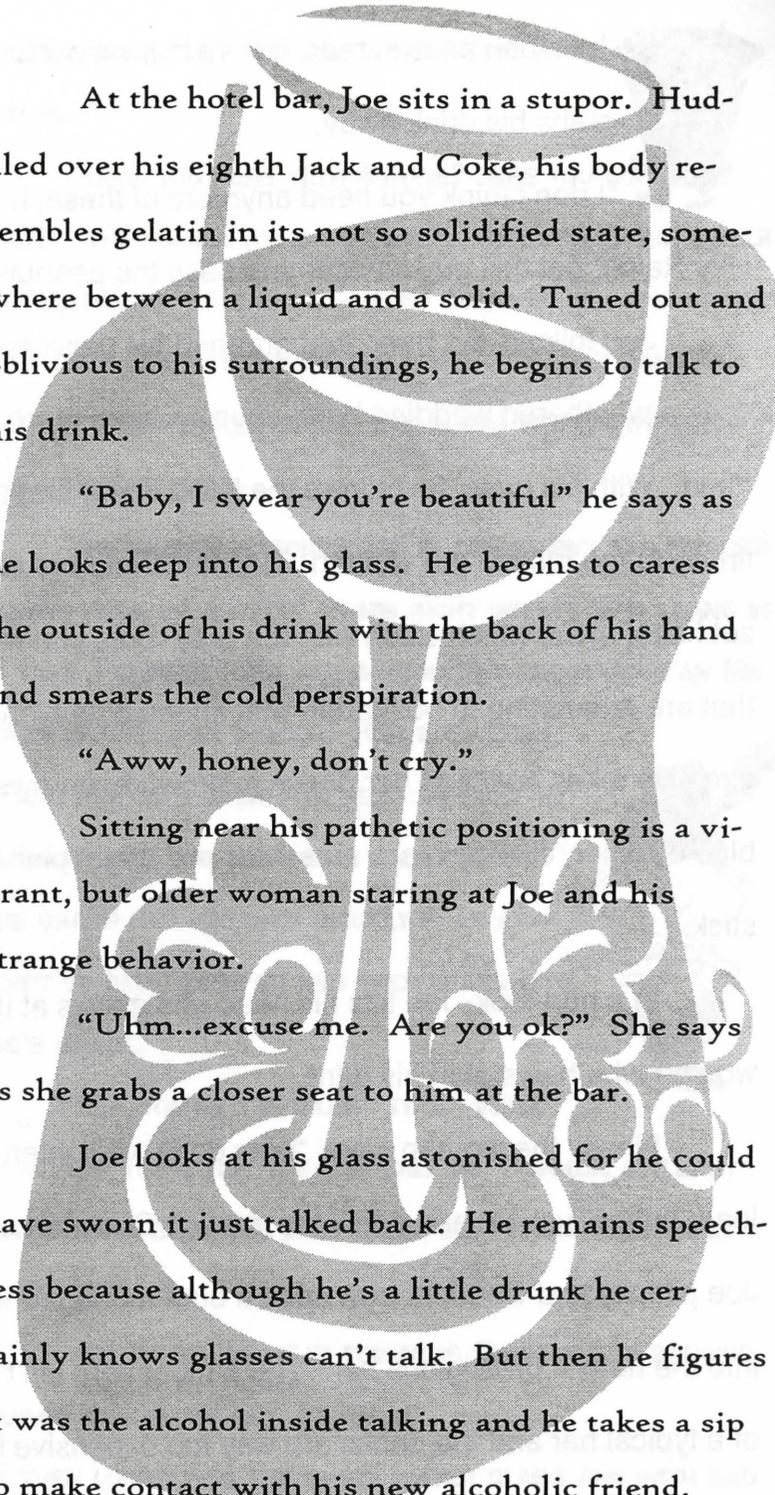
"Sir. Sir...sir..." Joe opens his eyes and realizes he's standing in the entrance way of the restaurant.

"Sir, you forgot to pay your bill," says the annoyed Italian or French waiter.

"Oh yes," Joe responds as he pulls his thick wallet out of his back pocket, "I almost forgot."

Later that night, Joe wrestles around in bed. He stares at the hotel clock which reads 12:31 AM in scarlet digital lettering. Staring at now a blur of red, he can't get rid of the deepened depression he's sunken into. I'm better than this. What's wrong with me? Joe always felt he had more self control than the average person; as long as he had a plan and strategy, everything would turn out alright. But he didn't want alright for his life. His options were limited in that he could continue with Miriam the way they had been going at it or join the other 51% of marriages that end in divorce. Joe couldn't imagine failing at anything in his life, especially in his personal life.

He decides that rotating around in bed like a top isn't doing any good, and that he needs a few drinks to clear up his mind. Grabbing a stained white t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, Joe gets dressed thinking, *Miriam would never approve.*



At the hotel bar, Joe sits in a stupor. Huddled over his eighth Jack and Coke, his body resembles gelatin in its not so solidified state, somewhere between a liquid and a solid. Tuned out and oblivious to his surroundings, he begins to talk to his drink.

“Baby, I swear you’re beautiful” he says as he looks deep into his glass. He begins to caress the outside of his drink with the back of his hand and smears the cold perspiration.

“Aww, honey, don’t cry.”

Sitting near his pathetic positioning is a vibrant, but older woman staring at Joe and his strange behavior.

“Uhm...excuse me. Are you ok?” She says as she grabs a closer seat to him at the bar.

Joe looks at his glass astonished for he could have sworn it just talked back. He remains speechless because although he’s a little drunk he certainly knows glasses can’t talk. But then he figures it was the alcohol inside talking and he takes a sip to make contact with his new alcoholic friend.



Just then an arm reaches out in front of him and grabs his drink away.

“I don’t think you need anymore of these, hun.

Hey Ralph, get this guy a water and pass the peanuts!”

Joe follows the hand that grabbed his glass and notices a weathered wedding band upon an even more aged hand. With his eyes, he follows the hand up an arm and finally to the face of the woman. He stares into her deep-set hazel eyes, which clash with the gray roots of her hair that are attempting to be hidden with cheap dirty blonde dye. He takes notice of her drawn in brown eyebrows, thick blue eyeliner, clumpy black mascara, and bright pink lipstick.

In a hurt look, Joe tilts his head and gawks at the woman who has stolen his drink.

Finally the woman says, “Why don’t we lighten the load, bubba, you’ve had a few too many.” She stares at Joe pitifully and wonders how such a bum managed to get into the hotel’s prestigious bar. The atmosphere isn’t that of a typical bar and the drinks are way too expensive for nightly splurges. To her, he doesn’t quite fit in.

**JOE REMAINS SILENT AND SALIVA BEGINS TO FORM AT HIS OPEN MOUTH.**

**“UHM, YOU HERE WITH ANYONE? ARE YOU GONNA BE OKAY?” THE WOMAN ASKS MOTHERLY. SHE GRABS THE WATER THE BARTENDER RALPH HAD PASSED DOWN TO HER AND OFFERS IT TO JOE’S LIPS. HE TAKES THE DRINK FROM HER HAND AND GULPS IT DOWN WHILE HOLDING THE GLASS WITH BOTH HANDS LIKE A THIRSTY CHILD.**

**THE WOMAN WATCHES JOE IN AMAZEMENT AND NOTICES A SHINY PIECE OF JEWELRY ON HIS RIGHT WRIST. SHE LEANS IN TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AND IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZES AN 18K ROLEX SUBMARINER WATCH. HER EYES LIGHT UP AND SHE SITS BACK INTO HER BAR SEAT TO READJUST HER TOO TIGHT NAVY BLUE DRESS. SHE GRABS HER BREASTS QUICKLY IN AN ATTEMPT TO PERK THEM UP AND THEN LEANS INTO JOE’S SPACE.**



**“SO, YOU’RE THE SILENT TYPE. WELL MY NAME’S TERRI, BUT YOU CAN CALL ME TWINKLE, AT LEAST THAT’S WHAT EVERYONE ELSE CALLS ME. WHAT YOUR NAME, STRANGER?”**

**JOE TURNS HIS HEAD TOWARDS TWINKLE IN A ROBOTIC MANNER AND SLURS OUT, “J-JOE...” HE THEN LOOKS INTO THE EMPTY WATER GLASS AND WITH SAD PUPPY EYES LOOKS TOWARDS TWINKLE.**

Twinkle grabs his glass away a second time and then whispers into his ear, "Well, Joe, we could order another round but ya know, this place is getting old. Why don't we go back to your place and then we can have as many drinks as we want."

Joe pulls his ear away from her mouth and stares at her dumbfounded. He wonders how long he's been talking to this woman and how they became such close friends.

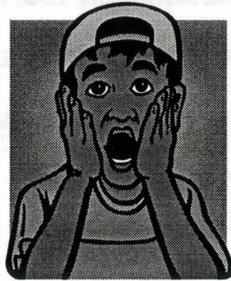
Twinkle begins to grow impatient and finally jumps off the bar seat and grabs Joe by the arm to help him down.

"Where's your key baby?" Twinkle asks as she begins to feel around in his jean pockets. Joe giggles like a boy and takes his pass key out of his back pocket.

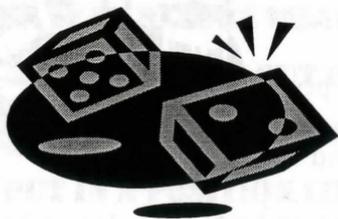
"Well, this is a start. Sugar, do you know what room you're staying in?"

Joe sheepishly raises five fingers, then three, and then two.

"Alright, room 532... come on." Twinkle leads Joe by the arm to an elevator in the lobby and up to room 532.



**Upon entering the room, Joe collapses on the queen bed with arms and legs stretched out. He stares up at the mirrored ceiling and looks down on himself. It reminds him of the time he went to Atlantic City with his family.**



Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Jezter! Soməone’s knocking on the door, wake up!”

Miriam screams, as she shakes Joe’s still body profusely.

Joe looks over at the hotel clock and says, “Miriam, it’s 2 AM. You’re gonna wake the kids.”

For Mother’s Day that year, Joe treated Miriam and the kids to a weekend in Atlantic City. He picked the Sands Casino, just a little off the board walk so the kids wouldn’t get intimidated by the local riff raff.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Joseph! I think someone’s trying to break in! The knocking is coming from the door that connects to the room next to ours!”

A voice on the other side of the door responds, "Hey Charlie, you got a girl in there too? Let us in fucker, we wanna parrrrrt!"

Miriam yells back through the door, "We're not Charlie! Go away, you have the wrong room! If you don't stop, we're calling the police!" Miriam looks down at Andy and Sarah sleeping



peacefully in the twin bed beside Joe and hers. She then looks down and Joe has fallen asleep again.

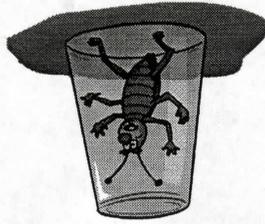
"Joseph Zachary Tampetzi, wake your sorry ass up and call the police before we get killed!" Miriam screams frantically.

Joe calls the Sands hotel security and they handle the disturbance next door. They also upgrade the family to a penthouse suite. That night the four of them pile into the master bedroom

**JOE CONTINUES TO LOOK DOWN ON HIMSELF AND IMAGINES HIS FAMILY HUDDLED AROUND HIM LIKE THEY DID IN ATLANTIC CITY. HE QUIRKILY GRINS.**

**INTERRUPTING JOE'S DAYDREAM, TWINKLE EXCLAIMS, "HEY SUGA- NO REASON TO SMILE YET. WE HAVEN'T EVEN BEGUN."**

**TWINKLE'S VOICE SOBERED JOE UP QUICKLY.**



**HE REMEMBERS BEING IN THIS SAME POSITION LAST YEAR AND THE YEAR BEFORE THAT AND SO ON. THERE HASN'T BEEN ONE YEAR OUT OF THE FIFTEEN SOMETHING YEARS HE'S KNOWN MIRIAM THAT HE HASN'T BEEN PUT IN A POSITION LIKE THIS THAT COMPROMISED THEIR RELATIONSHIP. AND EVERY YEAR IS THE SAME THING: HE RETURNS HOME WITH LIPSTICK ON HIS COLLAR AND PERFUME IN HIS CLOTHES.**

*However, Joe has remained a faithful lover for all those years. Miriam was his one and only, no matter what incriminating evidence or accusations Miriam presented him with. He knew he was the only one to blame for his questionable fidelity, after all he let himself get into these situations, but he always justified in his mind that nothing ever happened so it's not cheating. He also felt that no matter how much Miriam thought he was cheating, it didn't matter because he knew he wasn't and she'd never leave their luxurious lifestyle because of a few debatable flings.*

Once again, Joe finds himself in a hotel room with an overly zealous woman, ready to become the “other woman”. He knows he should sit up and tell her he has a family which he loves dearly and would never do anything to hurt. That’s the way he always lets them down, so that they don’t feel too insulted and actually respect him for his loyalty and honesty.

Joe kicks his feet up and rises to a clumsy standing position. He takes a big gulp and messes with his hair nervously.



“Uhm..Twinkle?”

“Yea, hun?” Twinkle responds as she pushes Joe to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. She sits on his lap spread eagle so that they’re intimately face to face.

“Well...uhm... ya see...” Joe stutters not knowing how or what to say.

“Well Twinkle, it’s just that....I got a court case tomorrow,” Joe sucks in some air, “and I need to get up early...” he



releases the air in a huge sigh, “so, lets make the best out of this before the sun rises, k?”

At the end of  
an arduous trip, to  
nowhere Mississippi, Joseph  
Tampetzi returns to Boston,  
Massachusetts. There huddled  
between famous architecture and  
prestigious families, Joe, Miriam, Andy, and  
Sarah sit at the dining room table.  
Miriam looks over at Joe who is  
sitting at the head of the table on  
the opposite end of her. No one is  
talking, and all that is heard is  
Sarah humming a song she has  
just made up at that moment.  
Miriam finally speaks up and  
asks, "How was your trip, honey?"

Joe looks at her, pursing his lips like a pouting baby. He knows she's just being a bitch; she doesn't really care how he feels or how it went. All she cares about is Avon's latest lip color and fast drying nail polish.

"Oh...I guess it went alright," Joe manages to push out curtly.

"I'm sure it was more than just alright, Joseph. You have been away for over three weeks. The children would like to hear about your trip."

Joe looks at Sarah, who is still singing her imaginary song, and Andy who is making the peas on his plate into a Bart Simpson face.

Silence engulfs the dining room once more. Joe looks over at Miriam and says, "Well, the trip went fine, but, ya know, nothing can replace home."

At this point, we leave Joe, Miriam, Sarah, and Andy. Each consumed in their own little world, obli-

ous to the planet around them. Sarah and Andy forced into the seclusion of imaginary life to ignore the painful reality of their parent's destructive relationship. Joe and Miriam, the active participants in a disparaging cycle of lies and deceit, to themselves and one another. Here they all continue, seated at their table meant for four, but sitting only one at a time.





his eyes bugged out, and his lips were too small for his face. In addition to this, his suit was a bright purple with orange trim. And he had something to say about what I was wearing.

"Where am I?" my voice was not as strong as his.

"You're in Oz, sweetie. Where else would you be?"

"Oz?" For a second there I actually believed him. After all, he was a midget dressed as a rainbow.

"Look honey, you look terrible. Your clothes need some help."

"My clothes? What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I thought I looked fine. This pink miniskirt has never failed me before.

"Sure, your outfit is alright if you were a go-go dancer. But what if you have to build a bridge or something? It won't work!"

Obviously this midget didn't shop on Rodeo Drive. I thought about kicking him, just for fun, but decided I needed more information. "What is this place about?" I asked him.

"I'm Big Jim." He said it without a trace of sarcasm. Maybe he was the tallest of them all, or something. "Do you want to trade clothes?" he asked politely. Now, *I was just plain freaked out. A crossdresser? You got to be kidding.*

"Uh..." I thought. "It's quite alright. I think I can make due with this." It was utterly freezing cold.

*I walked out to the middle of nowhere, down the road, to the Big Tree.*

"I've had such an adventure," I thought. "How long was I here?"

*I tried to recall much of the events as I shivered in the cold. I ended up hiding in the base of the tree and fell asleep to wake up to the new morning.*

**AMUSING? MAYBE. CONFUSING? YES. FUNNY? NOT.  
AN EXPERIMENT NOT TO BE TOYED WITH AT HOME**

# Subway Cars and Blues Clues Sneakers



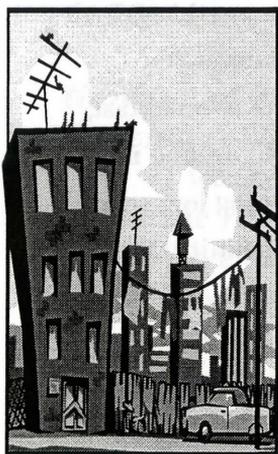
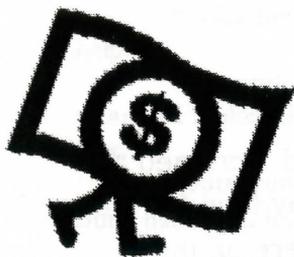
Swallowing a mouth full of blood, I cringed as I saw Ricky 's left boot approaching my face for the second time. All I could do was lay there on the floor of the subway car, praying somehow he' d miss my face this time. Of course, he didn' t. As I witnessed, in slow motion, his boot impact my jaw, I thought back to this morning. I never thought I' d end up like this.

11:08 AM 138<sup>th</sup> Street, Bronx: Paul

It all started when I ran out of coke, and I'm not talking Coca cola here. It's not like I'm a junky or anything, I just like to enjoy a little dust, flake, snow, whatever you wanna call it, once in a while. You know, once at breakfast, once at lunch, and twice at dinner. It was right around my midday high that I realized my stash was running low, so I needed to hurry before I started to freak out about it. Okay, I was freakin' out! I rushed over to my roommate's computer and took off the faceplate. To my surprise, his stash was rather short, too. Although there was a tempting offer of droppin some E, I passed, and didn't feel it'd suffice my already starting jitters.

I realized that between my pockets, my checking account, and underneath the sofa cushions I had a sum of exactly \$2.31. There was no way I could get coke on barely two bucks; it was time for Plan B, GET SOME MONEY. I couldn't hit up my mom anymore, cause I told her I'd been clean for the past month and takin the microwave to sell would be an obvious tip off of my deception. I came to the conclusion the best way to get quick dough in the city would be to hit the courts on 189<sup>th</sup>, hoping some newbie wouldn't know my angle. All those guys from Manhattan think that they can jump the Bronx and kick ass in some b-ball, but half of them don't realize all we got here is basketball and it's practically the only thing we're all good at. Bet money isn't only easy, but it feels so sweet, too.

Quickly I rushed over to my room, jumping over beer bottles and porn in the process. I threw on my best shirt (or the only one I could find) and flew like the speed of light out the front door. I was already running down the stairs of my crappy apartment building when the fat old lady on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor yelled, "Pervert!"



As a result I replied, "Fuck you!" and gave her the universal NYC symbol of the left arm crossing the right, topping it off with a nice middle finger. That is until I looked down and noticed I wasn't wearing any pants! Not only wasn't I wearing pants, but I forgot my boxers, too. I thought the stairwell had been a little breezy but that isn't unusual in the Bronx. Then again, it's not unusual for a coke addict to run around half naked either.

This is when I turned around and dashed my white ass up two flights of stairs, past the fat old lady who was still screaming pervert in my ear and who I was still bearing the New York "hello", inside apartment 41F, grabbed a pair of Tommys, and started my journey towards the subway, all the while scootin up my pants makin' sure not to catch anything important in the zipper.

My spirits were still elevated as I left the building, ignoring the occasional panic attacks and shakes. Afterall, it was only 11:20 and I still had a good two hours before my mood would drop and my trembles would be for real. So, I strolled down 138<sup>th</sup>...okay, maybe strolled isn't a good word. I was rushin down the street like a coke addict with fresh powder on his nose, pushin' every Mofu outta way whether they were in my path or not. Eventually, I reached my destination, and pressed my way down the stairs into the heart of NYC transit.

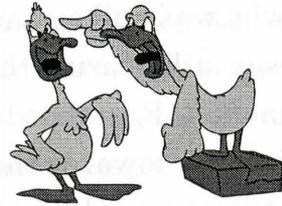


my



The station was typically crowded and people were bustling along through the turnstiles, which allow you to enter the station. Good ole Jeff, our resident subway cop, was watchin the passengers drop their tokens into the turnstiles, makin sure hoodlums like me don't jump over em. I don't think I have ever bought tokens, so when I get stuck with Jeff on duty I always cause a distraction. For kicks I grabbed this fine girl's hood and stepped away as my unsuspecting victim (today it was some Wall Street tight ass) got the hugest rush of attitude from the angry chicana.

People standing around the scene turned for entertainment purposes, as everyone else in the station ignored this everyday occurrence. Jeff, however, ran to save this poor man's life and I took the opportunity to place a hand on either side of the turnstile and lifted myself over the token sucking machine.



On my exit, I shouted, "Hey el Jefe! You're the man!"

Jeff, now positioned in between the frightened stockbroker and angry momma, turned his head in my direction and proceeded to yell, "Spierdalaj! You're mine next time, Paul!" I had absolutely no clue what the hell spier- whatcha ma thingy meant, but I wasn't gonna stick around to ask.

I headed towards the R train to the Bronx, and tried to sneak past some Harlem shakers makin a scene in the middle of the station. Those guys constantly pissed me off. Just 'cause they got rhythm and give a little wiggle, all these tourists throw their cash at

them like they're fuckin Eminem himself, when I'm the one who needed the mula.

I was almost in the clear until I heard, "Yo, Pauly! Pauly!"

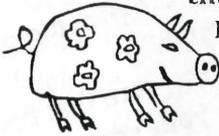
I knew that deep woofing voice and I kept on walkin.

"Hey Pauly!"

A chubby black hand grabbed my shoulder to turn me around and I backed away trying to get some space from my attacker.

"Fuck off, Piglet!" I yelled in his face.

Piglet, a friend from the neighborhood, was always getting in my face like that. Ever since we were kids and I gave him the nickname Piglet, to save him from his Earnest William the 4<sup>th</sup> tarnish, he thought we were bestfriends. He hasn't even realized to this day that the only reason I named him Piglet was cause he's a fat baby, just like the little pink piggy. He's alright and all, but jumpin up on me whenever I'm around just aint my thing.



He looked at me kinda hurt when I shot away and reacted with, "Yo man, why you playin me like that?"

"Why I playin you? I should axe you the same, foo."

"Come on, Pauly," His voice just kept woofin the words out like the bass in my boy Eric's SUV. "You got beef with me or somethin? I just wanted to see what's up."

I looked down at my watch and it only read 11:24 so I decided it'd do no harm to swap bullshit with him.

"Naw dawg, we cool. Whatcha doin' up so early?" Although it was almost noon, this was a question I often asked Piglet. This guy gave new meaning to the term "sleeping in"; he had "slept in" so much that I swear he became nocturnal for a while. He then "slept in" too much a second time, which cycled him into living during the day once more. Piglet's strange love affair with sleep was just as much an addiction as me with coke.

He responded with, "Up? Man! It's almost 11:30; I don't hit the crib for at least another 3 hours. (which means it was really late at "night" for him) Gotta make the most of the daylight, you know how it is." I had no

idea what it was like or what he was talking about, but shook my head anyway.

"So...uh, Pauly, where you headin', bro?"

Piglet had no idea when to quit it. He was constantly tryin' to give me nicknames: Pauly, P-dawg, the artist formerly known as Paul. It was so annoying. I swear I should have just left him as Earnest William the 4<sup>th</sup>, but I didn't think it was right for a brother in the ghetto to be so white.

"Look, Piglet. My name's Paul, remember? It's always been Paul, not Pauly, not bro, not- yo man. Paul." I delivered my speech rather well, even though I do let my peeps call me everything I said not to, but Piglet was different. I liked to bust his balls... well, just cause I could.

"Fine, PAUL." He definitely did that to piss me off. "You can just call me by my real name too then."  
"Okay, Mr. Earnest Willy the 4<sup>th</sup>. I'm sure that fine Kay-lah from my building would love to know your sexy birf name."

"Aww...forget it, man." Piglet shied away realizing he just lost my battle of the wits.  
"Aight then. It's time for me to get my groove on. Lates Piggy."

As I walked away I could hear him say, "Later, Pauly" and I chuckled to myself.  
Off I was, headin' towards the R once more, wonderin' all the while how lucky I was gonna be at and on the courts.  
*What poor sucka is waitin' for me today?*



4:00 AM 190<sup>th</sup> Street, Bronx: Ricky

You don't know what willpower is until you gotta get your ass outta bed at 4AM each morning. I don't even know why it's considered morning; nobody's awake, not even the sun. But hell, it's the finest thing to walk down 190<sup>th</sup> when the birds are still sleepin and the streets are still, when the only people awake are the ones who haven't gone to bed yet. Makes me proud that I pushed myself to view a part of the city people rarely get to see or appreciate. That, and if I don't, my parole officer will have my ass.

I guess it could be worse. I know some guys who gotta pick up garbage in the Upper East Side, and all I gotta do is make bagels and pour people their coffee at Tony's Bagels. It's tough havin to get up so early, never miss a day, and can't even talk bad to any customers no matter how rude they are, but I get paid and it's honest money. I work for my measly 8 bucks an hour and although I made more with those fake IDs on 42<sup>nd</sup>, I don't wanna end up in jail just to become someone's bitch, or even worse, lose my niece Anna.

Not a penny to my name and the courts awarded me custody of a 6 yr old, thinking an ID pusher is better than a crack whore mom. At the time, my step-mom would lend a hand now and then, so I actually was granted partial custody with Anna's grandma. Although Anna is suppose to be livin' with her right now, some how I ended up with sole responsibility over a child and Anna's grandma proved to be just as reliable as my step-sister. It's not like I'm gonna go runnin' to tell the courts of the predictament I'm in; hell, I wouldn't give Anna up for the world. But sometimes I question their judgment, maybe she woulda been better off in the system in foster care, at least then she could get everything she deserves, Blues Clues sneakers and all. She pretends not to notice, not care that we're different. We're not able to afford anythin better than the projects, and she acts as if it's a palace. That's why I love her, cause she's smarter than me and damn more prettier.



*My day started out as usual, I walked Anna down the hall to drop her off at our neighbor's place. Anna exclaimed, "Over the river and through the woods, to Momma Rosa's house we go..." My head pounded still from the early wake up call and couldn't believe the energy Anna always seemed to have.*

*"Hey tiny, my head is killin' me." Anna looked at me with sad baby blue eyes and frown in disappointment. "Okay, okay... off we go to Momma Rosa's casa... through the woods and river and all that other stuff, k?"*

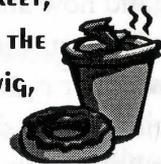
*Anna smiled as we reached Rosa's apartment. "Okay, Mr. Ricky Roo. C-ya later alligator!" and she jumped into my arms to give me a kiss on the cheek. It was right about then that my headache went away, and was lookin forward to the day once again.*

**I GOT TO THE SHOP AROUND 4:20, JUST ENOUGH TIME TO POP SOME BAGELS IN AND SWEEP UP THE STORE. I OPENED THE DOORS AROUND 5, AND THE USUALS WERE ALREADY WAITIN OUTSIDE.**

**RONNIE, A MIDDLE AGED BUSINESS MAN WITH A NO SHIT ATTITUDE, REMARKED, "DAMN, RICKY! IT'S FUCKIN COLD OUT HERE. WHY DONTCHA JUST WATCH US FREEZE FOR 10 MIN UNTIL OPENING UP?"**

**I RESPONDED WITH, "I JUST DID, DUMBASS."**

**NICKI, THE PERSONAL TRAINER FROM UP THE STREET, RONNIE, AND I, ALL LAUGHED AT THE ROUTINE BANTER OF THE MORNING. ANDREA, AN ASIAN SECRETARY TO SOME BIGWIG, JUST SMILED AS SHE FOLLOWED THE OTHER TWO INSIDE.**



**MORNINGS ALWAYS SEEM TO FLY BY 'CAUSE EVERYONE'S IN A HURRY. WHICH I DON'T MIND; IF THEY WEREN'T RUSHING I'D HEAR THEIR WHOLE LIFE STORY, MORE THAN I ALREADY DO. I SORTA RELATE MY JOB TO THAT OF A BARTENDER'S. I'M THE SAFE STRANGER WHO KNOWS ALL ABOUT NICKI'S LESBIAN LOVERS, RONNIE'S HEART MURMUR, AND ANDREA'S AFFAIR WITH HER BOSS. IF IT WEREN'T FOR CHRONIC HURRYING, MY DAYS WOULD GO MUCH SLOWER.**

**BEFORE I KNEW IT, JOSE WAS WALKIN IN TO END MY SHIFT. AFTER EIGHT HOURS OF SERVING BREAKFAST TO OTHER PEOPLE, I'M ALWAYS**

glad to get lunch for myself. Today I grabbed a number 3 from McDonalds; God knows that's a poor man's menu for life.

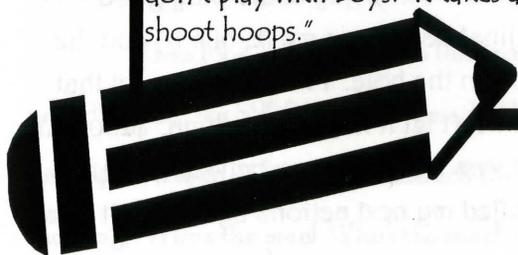
On my walk back to pick up Anna, I passed by the basketball court on 189<sup>th</sup>. I don't usually walk that way, it's just too tempting to join in and play with the guys. Not like shootin hoops is bad or anything, but those fellas can bring a man down fast. All I need is to look at someone wrong and my ass is grass. The last thing I need is to call attention to the fact that I'm raisin' a kid against the law's permission. Besides my worries, I decided today it'd be alright to hang for a little bit. At the first sign of trouble, I'd just bust outta there. Aint nothin wrong with playin some b-ball.

"Yo Ri-ck-y!" shouts Moe, a muscular black dude bearin guns the size of my thigh.

"Hey Mo-Moe." I looked around makin sure I knew the crowd well and shot out, "You girls done paintin' your nails? Wanna see how the big boys play this game?"

The kids on the sidelines playin hooky from school in unison barked, "Oooo...", egging a quick comeback from anyone on the court.

Then from behind where I was standin I heard an unfamiliar voice say, "Yea, but we don't play with boys. It takes a real man to shoot hoops."





I turned around to see the only other seemingly white guy on the court, besides myself, and even at that anyone who knows anything can tell I'm Puerto Rican with light skin. I glanced over at Moz, and he gave me one of those "you gotta be kidding me" looks. There was no backing down; I couldn't just let him play me like that and not save face. However, in the back of my mind I was hoping he wasn't some drug crazed loony lookin to start a fight.

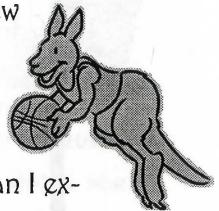
The only thing I could think of saying, and god damn I wish I hadn't said it was, "Wanna put some money where your mouth is?"

He responded with, "I hope you'd say that." And faster than it took me to register his words he said, "Fifty bucks a hoop, one on one, playin' the spread", throwing the basketball towards my chest. Right about then I'm thinkin, *is this guy for reals?*

I knew I didn't have any extra cash to be blowin on a game, but I still said, "Moz, you keep score cause this fool is crazy."

Looking the guy up and down, I hoped he was as bad a player as he was a dresser. I even thought I might be able to make out on this deal and buy Anna some new clothes.

The game went fast; we decided to play for thirty minutes. The guy was definitely better than I expected. No one thought this white guy could play good game, but he did. The final score was me 12, him 17, and the final tally being me \$250 in the hole. I wasn't gonna let that happen to me, and I couldn't let it happen to Anna. \$250 was food, it was rent, and it was the difference between me and foster care. I then justified my next actions by saying it was a



warm up game.

“Okay hotshot, one more game. A hundred bucks a hoop! Still spread.”

The guy smiled graciously, as if he wanted me to up the ante. Hell, I would too if I had just won the game.

It was close to 1PM and I didn't want Anna worrying about me, so I set the game for twenty minutes. Before I threw him the ball, I sized up my opponent for the second time, looking him up and down. He looked terrible. His face had grown paler and sweat was trickling off his forehead. I observed as he paced back and forth, jittering and talking to himself like he was having a conversation only he was meant to hear. I began to think it was possible to win my money back. I didn't have a choice; I couldn't let Anna suffer for my actions.



I played the hardest I had ever played, dodging back and forth as he came at me aggressively for ownership of the ball, jumpin' and leapin' like a frog on steroids just to get an advantage. I didn't just want to win, I wanted to slaughter that guy and show him he wasn't gonna get a dime outta me. He wasn't gonna get me down and take my hard earned cash. I wanted to show him, he aint got nothing on me or my Anna.

When Moe called time, the final score was me 6, him 2. Not only did I earn my \$250 back, but I made \$150 out on the deal, makin' his pay out a total of \$400. I ran around the court in a victory dance shouting, “Who's the man! Who's the man!” When I got my fill, I ran

back to where Moe and the guy were standing. I closed my eyes and put my right hand out palm up, ready to feel the thrill of having \$400 placed in my hand.

I waited for what seemed too long to wait for well earned bet money. It was then that Moe knocked me to the ground as he sprinted past me. I looked up in a daze, "What the f-..." And it hit me. Moe was chasing my money! The money my opponent obviously wasn't giving up without force.

I leapt off the ground and was in hot pursuit of Moe. Since I couldn't see the guy, I had to trust Moe was on the right track. Now I was never a runner; it just wasn't my specialty. But hell, you got \$400 of anger bottled up and you'll become the fifty yard dash gold medalist.

Through the streets and running across traffic, Moe and I were determined to catch that asshole. He led us into the subway and I knew we'd lose him for sure if we didn't gain on him fast.

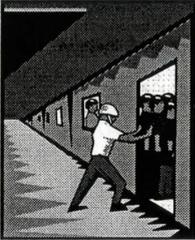
I caught up to Moe after we jumped the turnstile. We didn't even speak to one another; it was understood what was gonna happen if we caught that guy. Looking through the crowd was impossible, so I jumped up on a newspaper



machine.

"There he is!" I shouted, apparently too loud cause the guy heard me too and began running again. He was headed for a getaway car, and it turned out to be the R to the Bronx.

From a few feet back, I could see him hop into a subway car as the doors were closing. Moe and I quickly jumped into the nearest car to us,



two down from his. The car wasn't too crowded since rush hour hadn't started yet and barely anyone was standing, so we walked through with ease, headed towards the back.

As we skipped from one car to the other I started thinking about Anna and how I let her down. It was bad enough that I gambled away money meant for her, but I was then in chase for revenge. *I worked too hard for this, for Anna...just to blow it all away on some loser.* I thought about turning back, I really did. I could have just let it go, and forget about the stupid money and the whole day. I could have.

When Moe and I finally reached the last car we saw him sitting in the last row, all the way to the left, smug and waiting for us. Moe hustled down the aisle and grabbed the guy by his shirt, lifting him from his seat and pinned him to the backdoor of the car.



**“Yo, Ricky. Looky what we gots here.”**

**I stood back, looking into the guy’s eyes. He didn’t seem too afraid; his eyes were glossed over and dazed. I could see he had problems of his own. But I had problems, too; workin at a dead end job without a degree or a GED to help, supporting a child who’s only love in her life is her “Ricky Roo”, tryin to stay outta trouble just to get a chance to make something outta myself.**

**“Fuck this!” I shouted and punched that mother-fucker across the face. He dropped to the floor.**

**“Moe, grab his cash and sneaks. Get his belt, too.”**

**“His belt?” Moe questioned.**

**“Just shut up and do it!”**

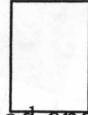
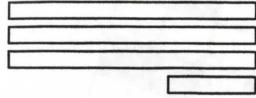
**I stood above the guy who was huddled on the floor and enjoyed the dominating position I had over him. I wanted him to feel the pain I felt. He needed to feel what it was like to work and work and not get anywhere in life. It wasn’t right for him to steal the money and pride from people like me, just tryin’ to better myself and my future. I then lifted my left foot and slammed it into his face as hard as I could.**



**“People are gonna know you’re a cheat when they look at you for now on.”**

**Moe interrupted with, “Yea bitch!” and handed me the guy’s belt. I then flipped the guy over on his stomach and tied his hands behind his back with his own belt. I kicked him back around to his back and said nothing. He looked like captured cattle. Moe remained silent.**

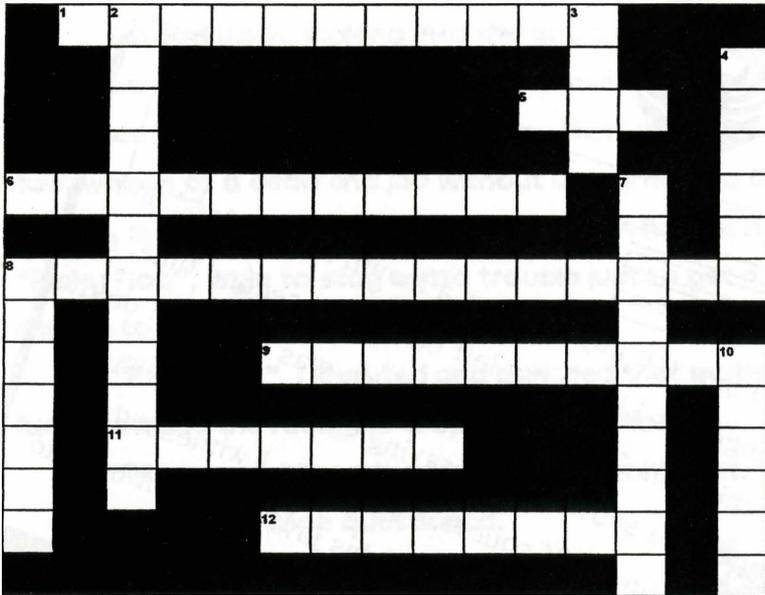




I saw the guy swallow a mouth full of blood and he cringed as I lifted my left boot for a second time, approaching his face. All he could do was lay there on the floor of the subway car, praying somehow I'd miss his face this time. Of course, I didn't. As I witnessed, in slow motion, my boot impact his jaw, I thought back to this morning. I never thought I'd end up like this.



## Test Your Attention Span



### Across

1. Joe's drink
2. place of family vaca
3. bass in SUV
4. Earnest William 4th
5. Anna's age
6. Ricky's job
7. ring to Joe's cell
8. sold on 42nd St.
9. what Jeff screams
10. Joe's petname
11. Joe's seductress
12. Ricky's nickname

### Down

1. Joe's drink
2. place of family vaca
3. bass in SUV
4. Earnest William 4th
5. Anna's age
6. Ricky's job
7. ring to Joe's cell
8. sold on 42nd St.
9. what Jeff screams
10. Joe's petname
11. Joe's seductress
12. Ricky's nickname

# *All About Me*

Name: Lisa Rose Agrusti

DOB: September 23, 1983

Location: New Jersey and California

(but not at the same time)

Occupation: Space Taker Upper/

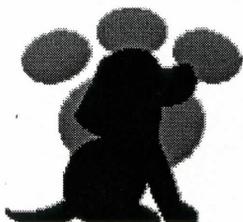
Professionally Lazy

Contacts: 909-481-0455 or

mentallisa@aol.com

**Dedicated to my family,**

**friends, and fellow**



**animal lovers.**

