

TOWN NAME
by Mark Arenz

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Town Name's Part-time mayor Dennis Richardson stood behind the borrowed card table that today would serve as both podium and ceremonial signing desk and delivered the one-line speech he had practiced for the past four days: "Folks, we're about to embark on a new and exciting chapter in this city's history- its final chapter."

The people gathered outside city hall, also known as the double-wide municipal trailer, waited patiently for Dennis to continue, unaware that his oratory was essentially complete.

"Well, there's no use in standing around," the mayor said eventually, his round face beaming in the dappled afternoon sun. "Let's get to it before it starts raining again. All in favor, say 'yea.'"

There was no need to go through the fine details of the deal, or even an overview of the situation. The crowd threw up an eager chorus of yeas.

"All opposed?"

"Nay," said Cecilia Beaumont quietly.

Dennis happily banged his ball peen hammer, signaling the official passage of the measure and leaving a quarter-sized dent on the surface of the table.

When it registered that she had been the only one to dissent, Cecilia became furious. "Wait a minute. Nay! Nay! What's wrong with you people? Don't you see what StarMart is going to do to this place? Everything you ever worked for, everything you ever loved is about to be paved over to make way for some ridiculous temple of capitalism, just like the one just a few miles down the highway. How can you let them do this to us? How could you do this to us?"

The clouds had started to roll in again, darkening the scene. Standing beneath the weakening sun, the people of the town looked like children gazing up from a Christmas stocking full of coal. Their once eager faces had suddenly grown sour.

Almost instantly she regretted saying anything. Her anger over the mega-retail chain's offer to swallow the tiny farm town whole had been building for months, but this was not the time or place to make her move, and now she knew it.

Her entreaty had moved no one, and now all that

remained was the slow crawl back to her hole, hoping that she could once again become invisible.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Beaumont," said a voice behind her, sweet like ice cream and battery acid. "I think that you might be a little confused here. You don't own any property named in the StarMart buyout offer. You've never really been involved in the community, and you don't even vote, if I'm not mistaken. I'm sorry. What was it again that you wanted to educate us all about?"

Cecilia knew the source well enough not turn to acknowledge it. Marlene Hausman, widow of Karl Hausman and the de facto owner of the town's only large employer, Hausman Athletic Supply Company. Her boss.

The crushing silence said enough. Cecilia could see it all in their sunken expressions. Many of the assembled Townnamers were too afraid of the woman to openly defend Cecilia, but there was something else. Loathe as Cecilia was to admit it to herself, Marlene was only saying what most of them were already thinking.

The StarMart deal was their best option, a shining gift from God that fell out of the dusty blue Illinois sky. Who was someone like Cecilia to refuse it?

"So, now that we've all paid attention to you," said Marlene, "why don't you go sit down somewhere and leave us

to our business."

Cecilia shrank back into the circle of people, nearly tripping over less-than-tall Louise Peterson. In spite of herself, she tugged nervously on her shaggy bangs as she watched her neighbors, each in their turn, sign the letters of intent necessary to begin the process of killing the only town most of them had ever known.

According to a marketing brochure produced in the early 1980's, Town Name, Illinois was the ideal place for any thriving business to relocate. The town boasted a variety of dining options (two, three if one includes eating at home), a vibrant night life between the hours of six and nine PM, and a business friendly local government promising generous tax abatements to any firm willing to move in.

The marketing plan was hatched during a particularly rough economic period after the area's primary employer pulled up stakes. Circling the drain since shortly after its founding in 1836, Town Name had gone through one bad patch after another, each making the one previous seem like a golden age of sorts.

People there had a saying: "In Town Name, folks only prosper in the past tense."

The citizens had good reason to greet optimism with suspicion and disdain. Every time a community-wide sense of well being took hold, it only served as a portend of some horrible calamity just around the calendrical corner.

In the mid-1970's, Town Name was poised to make a name for itself as the world headquarters for inanimate companion products. Pet rocks were all the rage, and the factory on Oak and Main was pushing out thousands every month into a hungry marketplace. New businesses were coming to town to supply the factory's voracious appetite for containerboard and geological raw materials.

After more than a hundred years of struggling to exist, citizens of Town Name suddenly had good jobs and disposable incomes.

When Jameson Homes came to town to build new state-of-the-art houses with attached garages and trash compactors, people mortgaged themselves to death to get a piece of the action. According to the full-color circular stapled to the town's handful of telephone poles, the homes would be the very epitome of the American dream. Just six months later, once a few homes were complete and the local economy had once again collapsed, folks found themselves back where they had started- but with fifteen percent APR loans on homes that were now essentially unsellable, worthless.

For three decades they waited as the town disintegrated from the inside and people worked two and three part-time jobs to pay the bankers and keep the dwindling town running at the same time. All the while, they kept well hidden their greatest dream: to bust out of Town Name like a cat with its tail on fire and never look back.

On the back page of the brochure, a phone number for the Town Name Chamber of Commerce offered to answer any and all questions about the town. Not counting the occasional wrong number or random crank call, the line in the mayor's office trailer rang only once.

So long had this gone on that when he picked up the phone on that fateful afternoon a few months earlier, Mayor Richardson did not expect to hear a sober adult on the other end. But he did.

Only after hanging up with the StarMart people, his heart ready to explode, did he realize that they never asked the one trivia question he had expected to hear: "how did your town get its unusual name?"

This might have been for the best, though, since Dennis did not have a plausible answer ready for them, anyway.

No one could quite agree on how the place came to be

called Town Name. At times it seemed there were more theories than there were residents.

Some said that Town Name came from two men named Towne and Newman who allegedly founded the place and then disappeared shortly afterward. Others insisted that it came from a Kickapoo word meaning "desolate hellhole," although that might have been a joke of some kind.

The most popular explanation was that the town drunk named the place after winning a competition of some kind: poker game, knife fight, or "name this town" essay contest. No records exist, at least ones that anyone has bothered to find, and so the mystery continued to grow with each passing generation.

"StarMart is going to put this place on the map," said Mayor Dennis when the signings were complete. "And if it doesn't, who cares? None of us are going to be here to get dragged down with it!"

The proposed Super-StarMart was designed to be far larger than any other retail outlet of its kind, a genuine feat of modern engineering. Compared to this new Super-StarMart, former size champions like Super Target and Mega Wal-Mart were merely huge. In fact, the plans were so big and the town was so small that the entirety of greater Town

Name would only make up the Southeast corner of the store, an area encompassing housewares and appliances.

Tim Bailey's spread North of Town would take up a larger chunk, from electronics all the way through sporting goods and into automotive. Naturally, he was quite proud of this fact, but people had already tired of hearing about it.

"The groundbreaking is on the 15th, June 15th, so we've only got a few weeks to get the place ready for dismantling, demolition or whatever," said the mayor.

In the crowd, Cecilia spotted her friend and older cousin Patti Mueller and slunk over to her in hopes that her pregnant belly might hide her from the piercing stares of her neighbors. Also standing in Patti's swollen shadow was her eight-year old son Ryan, looking more than a little bored by the whole thing. Ryan's thicket of pitch colored hair shot out from under his ball cap, the spitting image of his father.

"Rough crowd," said Patti.

"I'd love to tell that old bat to go self-penetrate, but you know how it is," said Cecilia. She suddenly felt the urge to change the subject. Patti had a reputation for being brutally honest at moments like this, and brutal honesty was the last thing Cecilia wanted at the moment.

"So, how's that basketball you swallowed treating you?"

"Fabulous," Patti replied, smiling broadly. As usual, there was not a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"I still don't get it," said Cecilia after a moment.

"Why StarMart? Why here?"

Patti adjusted the straps on her overall-shorts, rubbed Ryan's shoulder, and thought about it for a moment.

"From what I understand, these guys don't measure retail space in square feet so much as they do acres. Can you think of anyplace else in Central Illinois willing to sell big blocks of land like that any cheaper than us?"

"I guess so. But we're completely cut off. How are people going to get to the store?"

"StarMart's lobbying folks are working on getting an I-72 offramp for us. I'm surprised you haven't heard."

The ceremony was over by that point and the people were now milling around, unsure whether to head home or stick around and wait for the world to end.

Cecilia rubbed the back of her neck, reaching for something that would explain the whole thing for her. "But how are they going to deal with K12? What are the school-aged kids supposed to do, roam the streets?"

"Well, school's already out if you haven't noticed," said Patti, glaring at her son. "They began roaming the

streets just after Memorial Day."

"This rots," fumed Cecilia. "I know I'm the last person who should be making a big deal over this, but this really sucks. StarMart is going to screw this town sideways, and we all know it."

"I understand that you hate all of this, but relax. I know for a fact that it's going turn out okay. Okay?"

"Okay. How are you so sure?"

Patti rubbed her belly slowly. It was obvious Patti's baby was kicking her, but she did nothing to indicate that. "I just know," she said.

Still, Cecilia remained convinced that the buyout was a bad deal. The fact that everyone else in town loved the idea only served as more proof for her unstated argument.

Cecilia had made up her mind. She would have to save the town, from itself if she had to. This might have seemed odd, even hypocritical, due to the fact the she had been desperately trying to flee Town Name for most of her life.

Cecilia Beaumont had a name one would normally associate with a debutante, and perhaps in another life she might have been one. In this life, however, there was simply no time for that sort of thing.

To look at her, it became clear that she regarded much of the frou-frou of femininity as more than just a necessary evil, but evil itself. Fond of wearing her mouse-brown hair piled up and threaded through the back of an old hat in a disheveled cerebral explosion, she often claimed that she did not give a hoot what anyone thought of how she looked. Still, she was a handsome woman, though few people, including herself, seemed to acknowledge that.

Her desire to escape the place was a hallmark of her young life. Her mother Linda Beaumont used to tell a story that Cecilia would occasionally walk the five miles to State Road 67, flag down passing motorists, and offer to join their family.

At 16, Cecilia placed a personal ad in the Springfield Journal-Register in an attempt to lure an abductor to her home, and it nearly worked.

She stayed awake those nights dreaming of another life in another city. Perhaps he would take her all the way to Memphis or Chicago where she could start over and finally begin living.

She fantasized endlessly about walking down the eclectic urban streets into an upscale bookstore and chatting with brilliant young people- after shaking off the creepy 50-year-old pervert, of course.

The problem was that Town Name did not appear on any road maps, no matter how detailed. Even though she wrote to the anonymous abduction candidate with detailed driving instructions, complete with sketches of useful landmarks, he never made it. He might have gotten within five or six miles of her house and never known it.

By the time she wrote him back with another set of directions including compass points and photocopied aerial photographs, the faceless suitor had moved on.

Though twenty-two now, most people in town still treated her like a brooding teenager, and her general demeanor did nothing to help that reputation. She proved herself a continual annoyance to the citizens of the sleepy rural town, circulating petitions every few weeks on farm-friendly issues like "ranching as genocide" and "child labor on the family farm."

It was clear to her now that she had engaged in one pet project, one wolf cry too many.

Still soggy from her morning shower, Cecilia stood for

a moment staring into the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Out of habit, she shook her head disparagingly at her reflection. She carefully critiqued her body looking for some glaring flaw, but all she saw was a perfectly normal, healthy woman.

Still, there must be something wrong with me, she thought. It would make it so much easier to explain the complete lack of a romantic life.

Cecilia had only ever had one boyfriend, and that was back in high school. As if that weren't enough, she recalled that didn't even like him very much.

She caught herself thinking about it again and pinched her wrist to make it stop.

It was then that she noticed that hers were not the only pair of eyes looking back at her that morning. Without moving her head or neck, she carefully tilted her gaze out the window and into the clump of bushes beyond. In the dim dawn light it was difficult to make out more than a fuzzy shape, what looked to be a human head and shoulders very close to the ground.

She took this to mean that her Peeping Tom was a juvenile or better yet a short person, an exotic. That fantasy dissipated when the figure stood upright and broke into a full sprint through the yard and off down Pine Road.

"Whither will you go, sweet prince?" she muttered to herself. No such luck, she thought. It was probably just a dog.

Covering the walls of her room were posters depicting glamorous locales from all over the world. When Town Name Travel closed shop a few years ago, she bought them up on the cheap: Milan, Beijing, Paris, New York, someplace, anyplace. Some mornings she would get lost in landscapes, imagining the sweet air of the Alps or the musty smells of a Moroccan market, but there was no time for that today.

Her jeans and T-shirt pulled on and her hair still heavy and wet, Cecilia shambled into the kitchen to talk to her mother, but Linda was not there. Double shifts at the factory again, she thought.

"I would have left a note," she said to herself disapprovingly, realizing just then that she herself had not left a note the last two times she had the good fortune to rack up some overtime.

This was the state of their lives together. They did not so much converse as they complained to themselves about the other. Each would discover evidence of the other passing through the house and grumble while picking the other's underwear off the soggy bathroom floor.

Thinking about it too much made her laugh. What had

she to be envious of in the loveless, zombie-like marriages of her friends and cousins? She was already knee-deep in one- and with her very own mother no less.

The Hausman Athletic Supply Company sat on the corner of Oak and Main streets in the heart of Town Name, the three-quarters mark on the life journey of most residents.

Most folks born in Dr. Lauer's storefront office on the Northeast corner and got their education at the Elmer Watson School for Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade (known to the locals as K12) on the Southeast corner. They went to work at Hausman's on the Southwest, and when their work was done they found their eternal rest at the graveyard adjacent to the Town Name Church of God on the Northwest corner.

The Hausman Athletic Supply Company made bowling balls. More specifically, Hausman made soft polyester balls, a style of rolling implement that fell out of favor three decades before.

Unable to do the sort of sliding curves most modern bowlers demand, Hausman products were known primarily as beginner's balls, a good reliable roller to use until you learned your way around a lane. Still, Marlene said sales were brisk enough to keep the doors open, but only just.

In spite of this home grown industry, there were no admitted bowlers in Town Name. Curiously the test lane at the Hausman factory was the only bowling facility within 30 miles.

"Watch yourself," said Clark Stevenson as Cecilia walked onto the plant floor and nearly tripped over someone's errant lunchbox.

"Thanks," she replied, but he had gone.

Cecilia walked up to her molding station and paused a second before pulling the lever to begin her shift.

Let this day be different, she prayed to no deity in particular. Let something, anything, interesting happen. Please.

The trick in molding a good ball is to make sure the cover stock goes in evenly. Areas where the density varies can cause the ball to wobble slightly, rendering it worse than useless. Air pockets were the most dangerous ball irregularity and, for Cecilia, the most common.

With one near perfect ball already on the curing rack, she began to sense someone standing behind her.

"Good morning, Cecilia," said Craig Phelps. "You look, um, nice today."

Not that, she thought, rescinding her earlier prayer. That wasn't what I meant.

Craig Phelps was a large man with white-blond hair. In a crowd it was nearly impossible to lose him. But even with his imposing size, he could be very quiet when he wanted to be. He could, and did quite often, sneak up on Cecilia at odd times saying even odder things.

Years ago, he had been her high school social studies, history, and gym teacher at K12. As if that were not dull enough, he was now her immediate supervisor. It was almost as though she could not escape him. She admitted to having nightmares where she would die and find herself buried next to Craig in the churchyard across the street.

When he resigned at the end of the previous school year, there was no real reason for speculation or worry. He gave the simple explanation that he could make more money working at the factory, and most everyone accepted it because that part was true. Still, rumors persisted that he had been pushed out, that he had lost his temper with an unruly student or something worse. It was this "something worse" that Cecilia thought about now.

"By the way, I agree with you about the StarMart thing," he said at last. "I don't want to say anything too loud here at work, but I'd do just about anything to save the town. I just don't know what to do."

"I don't, either, Craig," said Cecilia shrugging. "I

wish I did."

She wanted to brush him off, but she needed to keep him around, interested. If historical romance novels had taught her anything it was that devoted, bookish men could be quite useful in times of need.

When she turned around, a sticky note had been taped to the just finished ball. "Please come see me," it said. Even with no name attached she could tell right away from whom it had come.

Another note had been stuck on the underside. "Please recycle defective ball," it read. "Pulls left."

"Ms. Beaumont, I know you've been working very hard at improving your quality numbers," said Marlene Hausman in her sprawling under-lit office. "And I really appreciate that. I really, really do."

Marlene Hausman was not a small woman by any measure, but sitting behind her husband's old desk she looked like an impostor, a little girl swirling round and round in her daddy's big office chair. Perhaps for this reason, Marlene remained completely immobile whenever she sat there, as though any movement at all would cause her deceased husband great pain.

In fact, she rarely used the office, preferring

instead the smaller secretarial office nearer to the factory floor so she could keep a closer eye on her slacking employees. It was only times like these, moments when she wanted to remind someone who was in charge, that the old man's gargantuan desk came in handy.

"I think, though, that you're going to need to pick up the pace a little," said Marlene. "Of the twenty-five balls you made on Monday, only fourteen were usable, of those only six passed the bowling simulator."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do," began Cecilia. She had intended to follow up with two minutes of well-rehearsed complaints about antiquated molding equipment and uneven filling compounds but never got that far.

"What do you think you should do about it?" asked Marlene reflexively.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want to know what it is that you want me to want you to do. What is that, Cecilia? What is it that you want me to want you to want to do?"

"What, I don't understand. Am I being fired or something?"

"Not fired. No. You're just under a kind of suspension- the kind where you still get to work but don't get paid as much for a month or so."

Marlene was still smiling, her teeth set and her lip upcurled. "Yeah, well, I'm glad we had this little talk," Marlene said to break the silence. "Girl talk, you and me."

Cecilia left Marlene's office feeling drained, confused, and somewhat dizzy.

By the time she returned to her station, there was another surprise visitor waiting for her. This time it was, of all people, Mayor Richardson. By now Cecilia had resigned herself to the idea that, in spite of her current probationary status, she was not going to get any further work done until people stopped lining up to bother her.

"I'm getting the town's records organized and ready to ship off to Springfield, and I'm having a hell of a time," he said.

She waited for him to get to his point, but he appeared to have none. She gestured at her station to indicate that she had work to do.

"Oh!" he said. "I could really use your help."

"My help?"

"I talked with Craig and he said of all the former students he knew you had the most talent for organization, a natural for this kind of thing."

The thought of Craig's recommendation concerned her.

People were saying things about her when she was not there, but at least they were good things.

"What are you needing me to do?"

"Mostly just alphabetizing and sequencing paperwork. It's pretty straight forward, but there's a lot of it and we've only got a few days to get it all done."

It turns out this plea for help was actually a job offer. Of course, it was a short-term part-time job offer, but the money couldn't be any worse than Hausman's and she figured the change of scenery would keep her from bashing her head against the wall.

"My civic duty demands it," she replied.

"I don't- um, did you say yes or no?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll do it."

Seeing the mayor this close was odd for Cecilia. Dennis served as the closest thing the town had to a celebrity, and being right up on him, having him ask for help like that, was more than a little strange. She noticed his pores for the first time. They were enormous, like a thousand greasy suckers stuck to his face with sweat.

"Meet me at City Hall tomorrow morning. I already spoke with Marlene, and she said she could manage without you for a few days."

"I should have known."

3

If Reverend Daniel Meyr had a single talent, it was his ability to aggressively ignore things, to fervently let things slide. While some men of the cloth would hide from difficult social questions or internal budget battles, hoping that the issues would eventually go away, Reverend Meyr went much further in his search for serenity. From difficulties in his marriage to his ever-failing comb-over, Daniel remained happily, even resolutely, oblivious.

The upcoming revival meeting was a great example of this. The event, put on by one of the region's many traveling freelance preachers, had nothing to do with the Town Name Church of God other than the location, but he was still obligated to make an announcement, such as it was.

"I'm pretty sure that you already know all about it, so there's no reason to go on and on," said Daniel in his signature monotone. "The tent revival, for anyone who wants to go, is this Wednesday night in the parking lot. In a tent."

He shifted his weight behind the pulpit and scanned the eyes of the congregation, trying to gage their reaction to the idea. He felt obligated to say something about the revival, but once he saw the spark of recognition in their faces, he regretted mentioning it at all.

"If you remember the last time, they drove their tent stakes into the pavement," said Daniel sadly. "That's bad, just downright disrespectful. Let's not do that this time, m'kay?"

Most weekends, Cecilia found herself there out of habit. For her, church was more of a people watching exercise, and today she was watching Stella Copper. In the announcements segment of the service, Stella recounted a recent meeting of the youth group car wash committee.

"Everyone is really excited about the potential for this to be the best event yet," Stella said as people rustled their bulletins and shifted their legs. "Russell had a really good idea to reschedule it from the end of next month to later this week since there may not be a next month for many of us. It's all very exciting."

It is common knowledge that at any given church, eighty percent of the work is done by twenty percent of the people. Factor that down to the actual number of people in Town Name, and that twenty percent would come in the form

of Stella Copper. She ran the Sunday school program, youth group, vacation Bible school, and in her spare time she offered to organize the church's volunteer program in which she was, more or less, the only volunteer.

When a ministry needed more money, she would often organize a bake sale in which she would make all the items, put up the fliers, run the register, and then buy half the items herself.

The only problem was that Stella was actually Catholic. Although the Town Name Church of God was officially a Baptist institution, Reverend Meyr wisely elected not to broach the subject directly, keeping the issue on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis.

Stella's husband Paul had died five years earlier during a particularly angsty period in Cecilia's life when issues of mysterious death, intentional or not, fascinated her.

From Cecilia's recollection, Paul had to have been one of the most pathetic people she had ever known. For one thing, she never heard Paul finish a single English sentence. Habituated to being interrupted by his wife or anyone else, Paul tended to mumble a lot, beginning phrases and then trailing off before his point could be made.

Like the expressionless Lincoln statue in the center

of town, Paul Copper's face appeared lifeless. He was not happy or sad from what Cecilia could figure, just there. His biggest accomplishment, it seemed, was that he always seemed to be around. Either standing next to his wife at an event and looking at his shoes or sitting at his desk at Dennis Richardson's feed store pretending to read an implement catalog, Paul Copper was never hard to find.

That was why, as odd as he may have been to have around, his absence was far stranger.

When Cass County sheriff deputies found a car belonging to Paul Copper up-ended in the dried muck under the Mucilage Creek Bridge, the incident seemed fairly straightforward.

Jim Pollard snapped his pen onto his clipboard and marched up to sheriff Downey's patrol car. "Slam dunk, sir. One car accident and vehicle abandonment. Possible 502."

"There don't appear to be any footprints," said Downey.

"They were probably washed away during last night's flood."

"Or maybe the body was washed away."

"Pardon my frankness, sir, but I'm not seeing it." He

could see already that a full-on argument over the matter would not profit him. "I'll inform the local blues."

"Make that 'blue.' They've only got the one cop. If our man doesn't show up in a week, it's an accidental death. I know these people, Jim. I don't want to make a big deal out of this without a good reason."

So, in this way the official version of events solidified. Paul Copper had died in a car accident. His body was thrown from the car in the force of the impact and was never recovered.

However, that was not what Paul wanted people to think at all.

It is a scientific fact that Sundays are the most depressing 24-hour period on the modern calendar- or if not a fact, at least a widely-accepted assumption. The segment of time beginning just after church lets out and before dinner is served has the ability to ensnare people in a melancholic sort of laze.

In Town Name, this phenomenon was more dangerous, even deadly. If someone wasn't careful, they could easily spend their Sunday joylessly avoiding the tedious demands of their lives (spouses, chores, and lawns), waiting the demons out until Monday morning when they would once again

be free of them. Then around five in the afternoon on Sunday, when the prospect of an equally tedious workweek loomed, they would begin the cliched countdown to the weekend, and run the cycle of tedium once again.

A fully qualified psychiatrist would probably have said that Paul Copper was afflicted with an undiagnosed psychological disorder in which he could not differentiate between the sensations of boredom and a desire to end his life. Be that as it may, he was having a particularly bad Sunday afternoon five years before, a lifetime of Sundays culminating in a singularity from which not even light could escape.

It began as Paul watched football in the family room, what he called "the brown room" due to its mid-70's earth tone décor, but only when he knew Stella was not listening. The Bears and the Vikings were facing off in a pre-Thanksgiving brawl, one of the tightest contests in recent memory.

In truth, Paul hated football, but he never let that tidbit slip out of fear that it would spur unfortunate rumors. He also believed in his heart that if he forced himself to watch enough of it, he would grow an appreciation for the game or at least learn enough to more effectively fake it.

As Minnesota's Gary Anderson squared up on the ball for what would be the winning field goal attempt, Paul practiced his routine for the next day at work. "Did you see that cheese head nail that kick in overtime?" Wait a minute, he thought, Cheesies are Packers fans, right? He was not sure, nor did he really care. The outcome of the game did not matter; neither team was in contention, just fighting to stay above 500.

He was just standing up to put away his chips and rinse out the red mush at the bottom of his bowl of salsa when he said it. "I've done all I'm going to do in this life," he heard his mouth say. "I'm done."

It was true. He would not pass on a fleshy legacy in this lifetime. And the idea of becoming famous or notorious at the age of 52 just seemed silly and presumptuous. Stella had been so busy for so long with her two jobs and work at the church that she didn't think she had room in her life for children, even if she weren't too old to have them.

Paul had harbored an ill-advised pipe-dream for most of his life of sailing around the Florida Keys and somehow making a living at it, but since piracy was not an option, he was stymied at step one.

All the interesting things he wanted to do, vague and

unnamed, were unavailable to him now. Perhaps they had always been, but the sobriety of age brought that fact to clear focus.

There it was. Paul Copper would not do anything significant with his life.

The realization of it made him dizzy, a feeling that did not abate when he sat back down. The days were passing faster now. The ceaseless cycle, the rhythm of it was hypnotic: wake, eat, work, eat, work, eat, TV, sleep, repeat. The only thing that really upset him anymore was disrupting the routine. Six months before, when the local IGA ran out of Crunchy Bran cereal, Paul nearly lost his mind.

He read an advice columnist once posit that people with messy houses and no time to clean them should not spend a great deal of time looking at their carpets. The numbness of sight, the ability for piles and messes to become invisible over time, is a valuable coping tool, she wrote. Paul was now looking hard at his anonymous future and he could not go back to not seeing it.

"At this point, I am just waiting around to die," he said. The pain in his stomach bent him over in agony. He swallowed another handful of chips to quell it, but the stinging in the depths of his belly only grew sharper.

On an average Sunday at the Washin' Tub on Three Points Road, all ten washers and dryers would be humming from the time the doors opened at 8am until 6pm when the machines stopped operating, regardless of their laundering status. Competition to get an appliance was stiff, and people would usually set up camp for hours to get a decent spot.

The place was generally dead every other day of the week, and in spite of the sign advertising "Wait-Free Wednesdays," the uneven usage schedule continued.

Cecilia and Patti had successfully secured washers 3 and 4 on this particular Sunday, nice ones with plenty of water pressure and a view of the empty street.

She could hear someone cueing up behind her, jostling their items onto the sorting table, making their presence known.

"I thought you and Linda had a set at home."

She turned around. It was Louise Peterson, the only person known to occasionally use the Washin' Tub on its many off days.

"The dryer's okay," replied Cecilia, "but the washer's been busted for about six months."

"At least that way you don't have to pay to dry

everything." Louise leaned closer to whisper hoarsely. "The drying phase is where they screw you sideways. Consider yourself lucky, honey."

Although Louise Peterson made it a point to never accurately give her age, other women who knew her well judged her to be around 63. After discounting for the natural cattiness of age guessing among elderly women, that placed Louise Peterson squarely at 61.

She was at her happiest, she said, when spinning a pot in the shed behind her house, and after doing it nonstop for more than a decade she had become quite proficient, and prolific. At some point a year or so earlier, Louise decided to turn her hobby into a business of sorts, selling the unique creations in front of her tiny bungalow on the corner of Pine and Illinois.

There was one very important item to note about these pots. They each had a charming, but unmistakably phallic quality to them, almost medical in their detail. No one else in town seemed to notice the similarity, or would admit to it, but when Cecilia first saw what looked like veiny ridges running down Louise Peterson's pots, she could no longer ignore the phenomenon.

Before long, Louise had assembled quite an inventory,

rows and rows of terracotta peni standing rod straight in the golden sunlight. It was enough to make a decent woman blush and a man feel inadequate.

The righteous and God-fearing people of Town Name fully intended to politely ask Louise to cease and desist, or at least move her operation indoors and away from young eyes. However, since so many were too afraid to admit seeing the ribald shapes in the clay, nothing concrete was ever done about the so-called "Louise Peterson problem."

Needless to say, she sold very few of the items. Still, her will to make the items far outstripped her business acumen, and soon her front yard was overrun with an army of helmeted soldiers, ready and waiting to do Louise's bidding.

"I don't like that Luke Reynolds, do you?" said Louise after a moment.

"Who?"

"The new fella from StarMart, he's supposed to be in charge of hiring new people and whatever. I am not enamored of him."

"How do you mean?" asked Patti. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's a bit too '24' if you know what I mean."

The Jeff Gordon reference was not lost on the other women in the Laundromat. By this Louise meant to insinuate that Luke Reynolds was a slick out-of-towner disguising himself as a down-home boy. Under his folksy exterior he could be anything: a corporate lawyer, a hustler, even a Californian.

Patti let out a barely audible gasp.

"I haven't met him yet," replied Cecilia, pulling a wet pair of old jeans from the washer. "I wouldn't know."

"Neither have I, honey, but I do know. He's a snake."

"He's just like anybody else here," said Patti. "You need to give him a chance. You could try talking to him."

"Mark my words, this guy has come here for something he won't come right out and say- and he won't leave until he gets it."

Louise said the words slowly, as though she meant the others to take them as prophesy, and waved her finger meaningfully in the air.

Unfortunately, Cecilia and Patti did not know what to make of her statement, and hours later Louise would admit to her own cats that she wasn't too sure, either.

Cecilia crammed the rest of the soggy load into her baskets and waited for Patti's dryers to finish. Suddenly remembering something, she began rummaging through the

sopping items.

"What are you doing?" asked Patti.

Cecilia held up several pairs of grandma panties. The initials "LB" were Sharpied onto the waistband. In the other hand were a few "CB" undergarments.

"Actually, I've been losing stuff recently," said Cecilia.

"Losing? Like what?"

"Well, that's the weird part. It's underwear mostly, a pair a week usually. And not all of our underwear, just mine."

"Weird. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, duh. Buy more underwear, of course."

Cecilia yielded her washer to Louise with a nod, gathering her dripping baskets before strapping them to her bicycle for the ride home.

"I'd do just about anything to kick those bastards out of here, you know," said Louise.

"StarMart?"

"I know you feel the same way, honey. Don't worry, I've got a plan."

Cecilia shuddered at the notion. "I was thinking of a large-scale protest at the StarMart in Jacksonville," Cecilia said by way of interruption. Patti looked over in

disbelief, but Cecilia continued. "We could notify the regional media, give them a real story to chew on: local residents protest as mega-retailer swallows small farm community."

"Did you just pull that out of your butt, Cessi?"

"What does that mater?" asked Cecilia. "It's still a decent idea."

"Do you really think you can get enough people to mount a 'mass' protest?" asked Patti, "Like some kind of million hayseed march or something?"

Louise was by now fully charged up about the idea and would not be dissuaded. "I'll start getting people together, honey. I think you'll be surprised."

"What was your idea, Louise?"

"Oh, I was just going to make something up, you know."

Linda Beaumont's bicycle was a classic, both in terms of its age and decaying state. Laden with baskets of dripping laundry, the thing could barely move, let alone turn. She managed to make progress toward home by punting through the streets with her feet dangling along.

There was a bright side, of course. At least it was no longer snowing. Winter was a horrible time for this kind of work-around.

As she cruised along the City Square at the center of town, she noticed something strange going on in front of the shops there.

Nadine Lauer, wife of the town doctor, was standing insecurely on a ladder in front of her beauty salon, struggling with something on her sign.

"You gonna let me help you with that, Nadine?"

"Sure," she said looking down. "Hold this stupid ladder while I unhook the sign."

By the time she found a wall on which to prop her unbalanced bike, it was all over. The two hundred pound chunk of aluminum and glass fell to the ground with a terrible crash. The resulting sound ripped through the quiet brick corridors of downtown like a bowie knife.

"Oh, well," said Nadine. "I can't bring that with me anyway. I'll go get a broom."

When she returned, Cecilia's curiosity was rabid. "Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where is the place you can't take this sign?"

"Oh, Rushville. Karl's just got his hands on a double-slot in a strip mall. There's loads of highway traffic there, too. People from all over just walk in."

Cecilia held the dustpan while Nadine pushed several

pounds of glass shards onto it. She straightened herself, unsure where to dump it.

"Where are you and Linda going? Please tell me you've looked at Rushville."

Nadine snapped a black garbage bag and opened its mouth. "Well, we hadn't talked about it much." Cecilia shook out the pan and stooped down for another go.

"Oh, you really should. It would just be super if Linda and you and a bunch of the, well you know, better folks in town moved up to Rushville. It's beautiful there."

Just inside the glass doors, Cecilia could see the neat row of barber chairs sitting still shining in the dull afternoon light. In spite of the overhaul Nadine had performed when she took over the shop years before, the place still looked the same as it always had, at least along the far wall. The line of overhead hair dryers and manicure stations did little to lend an air of femininity to the shop.

As a girl she would accompany her father to the place known only as Barber and watch the apron-clad man shave off most of Peter's pepper-colored hair. On slow days she was allowed to sit in the chair next to him, swiveling slowly around and around. The place always smelled of the blue

hygienic liquid the cutters stored in tall decanters along with long black plastic combs.

The practice of going in every few weeks seemed silly to Cecilia since he would tuck it all up under his old worn-out hat, anyway. Regardless, the barbershop had a magical, almost spiritual, quality to it, as far as young Cecilia could tell. Her father always left the place saying he felt like a "new man."

She wanted to get her hair cut there, too, but her mother was horrified by the possibility of her daughter coming home with a flat top.

In another couple of days the bulldozers would make short work of this place, she thought.

Another load of glass and she was done. By then people from the surrounding neighborhood came running, thinking (and perhaps hoping) the worst. Cecilia climbed back onto her rickety ride and pushed off again.

Nadine called after her. "You can't put it off forever, Cecilia."

She wondered for a moment about the sudden tapping noise. It had begun to rain.