

Cucumbertini

by Larry Strattnr

Cars lined both sides of the dark Monroe County road.

He didn't attempt to enter the gate and drive up to the house; merely motored to the last car parked at roadside and took the next spot. Careful not to get too close to the ditch. It wouldn't do to back into it later. No matter though. An identical Holman Moody Fairlane won several national dirt track championships. His car could probably drive out of an even deeper ditch. He made slightly stoned "vroom, vroom" noises in his throat. .

He parked in front of a Porsche 911S. *Like to see him try to get that puppy out of the ditch*, he thought walking by, *Nice car though. Wonder where people get the money to buy cars like that?* He knew the answer and it made him uneasy.

A few hits off a leftover spliff on the way over relaxed him. When Alexis handed him her invitation she said, "There will be a lot of writers and musicians there. Maybe even some film people. You'll have a good time. It'll be interesting." The weed made him ready to be interested.

Cars parked up both sides of the driveway, blocked light from ubiquitous decorative solar lanterns. He looked between the front and rear bumpers of a Cadillac and Lincoln and realized these lights were not the plastic, solar chip variety but rather wrought iron, custom, with a real bulb variety. Maximum bucks at this address.

Alexis told him the host's name. He promptly forgot. Four or five valet guys waited near the front door. He kept the invitation in his sport coat pocket and walked into the house.

“My, my, my, how are you this evening? We're so pleased you could join us.” An elegant woman in a silver dress stood in front of him. She was wearing a diamond necklace and holding a martini glass. “I'm Gloria,” she said. “And you are?”

“Wenz,” he said. “Wenz Smith.” His real name was William but he called himself Wenz, an old family name. Wenz was memorable, useful in his work. He had looked in the phone book and there were ten William Smiths listed, in addition to forty other Smiths. William is a perennial top ten boy-baby name. Bill Smith. Talk about ubiquitous.

“What do you do, Wenz?”

“Uh. I write. I'm a writer.” He began to wish he had only taken two hits of dope instead of three.

“Really? How exciting. What do you write? Novels? Perhaps poetry?”

“Uh. No. I write content.”

“Really? Content? What's content?”

“Um. Blog inserts. Brochure copy. Speeches. Stuff other people use as part of their projects or work.”

“Oh. Content.” She sounded a little less sprightly. “Well there are a number of writers here somewhere. I am sure you will enjoy yourself.” She raised her glass to him as if in a toast, turned and fluttered away, *the hostess whose name I forgot*.

He stood looking after her; feeling like Robert Zimmerman before he became Bob Dylan.

A bar was visible on the far side of the crowd in the next room. Making his way he noticed everyone was dressed a notch above him. Men wore suits or expensive sport jackets with ties. Women, either long cocktail dresses or shorter dresses he supposed fell into the 'little black' category.

Comparatively, his wool/silk sport jacket, turtleneck shirt and dark khaki slacks were casually professor/author. He wasn't dressed as well as the valets and waiters.

"Who might you be?" The denizen of a little black dress startled him. She had come up on his right; holding an elegant Martini glass; smiling. A thin silver chain suspended a single black jewel resting at the top of her cleavage.

"Wenz. Wenz Smith," he said. "I'm a writer." Taking his lead from Gloria.

"Really? And you write...?" asked her breasts in the black dress, making excellent eye contact. He smiled at them.

"Oh, novels, poetry. That kind of stuff."

"How interesting. Would I have read any of your work?"

How the fuck would I know, he thought, but caught himself. "Perhaps. I am included in the Poets of Angst and Unrequited Love anthology," naming a pulp magazine where any idiot could publish anything and did frequently. No one read much poetry beyond eighth grade and these breasts turned out to be no exception.

"How exciting. Let's get you a drink and maybe you could recite for me." She took his arm steering him toward the bar. He noticed the crowd parted respectfully for her breasts.

He was close to the end of his sonnet, 'Blowing on the Creative Spark' when she finished. "Whoa!" he yelled, gripping the bathroom sink counter, his hips jerking. She pulled away smiling, dabbing her lips with a tissue. She stood and he grabbed for the hem of her little black dress. She slapped his hand gently. "None of that, silly boy. What do you take me for?" She adjusted herself, made sure the dark jewel was correctly nestled in her cleavage. "Let's get back to the festivities." Before he could say anything further she opened the door. "I enjoyed your poem," she said over her shoulder melting into the suits and frocks.

He requested Chopin vodka for his next Martini. Chopin with a couple muller slices of cucumber, a few drops of lemon juice and a smidge of simple syrup, shaken. "It will be a moment sir," said the sartorially superior bartender. "We'll have to rustle up a cucumber from the kitchen."

"Sounds like an interesting Martini," said the man next to him at the bar.

"It is. Very crisp. But I recall reading recently 'if it doesn't have gin and vermouth in it, don't call it a Martini."

His new acquaintance laughed. "You've a point. I'm Michael Hunt. Pleased to meet you," offering his hand.

"Wenz Smith," said Wenz Smith, shaking hands. He knew he had a good handshake. Firm. Decisive. No psychological games, too-strong grip or subtle turn of the other guy's hand toward a submissive position. Plus Wenz smiled when he shook hands, like he gave a shit about you.

"...of Hunt Publishing," Michael continued. "Technical Books and Manuals."

'Pleased to meet you," said Wenz. He put on his 'I care about you' smile, and flashed on his sadistic Grandfather who loved to shake hands with his grandchildren and grind their little knucklebones to dust while harrumphing, "How's your corporosity young man?" *The old prick*. "What kind of technical books?" He managed to refocus. *Fucking weed*.

"Engineering. Mechanics. Medicine. Pretty much any technical subject you can name. What about you?"

"I only write content."

"Really? I always envied writers. Creative. Independent. Sometimes rich if they hit on a bestseller... What's content?"

"Content. Like maybe a chapter for one of your books here and there. I don't write stories; fiction. I don't write complete books."

"Content, huh? Why don't you send something over to me and I'll take a look."

Wenz could tell, a.) Michael wouldn't take a look, b.) didn't give a shit and c.) hadn't really grasped the concept of Content. "Nice to have chatted," he said, wondering if he was slurring his words yet. Michael was already turning to talk with someone else.

One elbow resting on the portable bar he sipped his Cucumbertini. "Excellent," he said to the bartender and slipped a five into the tip glass.

"Thank you sir. Kind of you to say so." Wenz wondered if the bartender meant it or if he should have slipped the guy a twenty. These suits and dresses looked like twenty dollar tippers. He wondered if he should have tipped the tits in the little black dress a twenty. *Nah. They might have taken it the wrong way.* He

sniggered. Swallowed the rest of his Cucumbertini. "One more, please; a double," he said to the bartender. "Have the young man bring it over, thanks," pushed off from the bar heading for the closest conversation circle."

Two women and three men were discussing a celebrity adulterer on some metaphysical level. "Evening," he said. "Wenz Smith, writer. May I join you?" They paused. Assessing his aggression perhaps. "I've heard he was a cheapskate," Wenz said. "Flew all his backdoor women around on Southwest Airlines. Didn't even pay for them to be in the first boarding group. Put them up in a Motel Six before he brought them over to his hotel to do them." A waiter deftly held a small tray in front of him and he picked up his very full Cucumbertini.

"Thank you my good man." Wenz carefully lifted the glass by its stem.

Behind the waiter stood two very large persons in black suits with black bowties. One who sounded as if a small animal was stuck in his throat said, "Mr. Smith? A brief word if I may?"

"Certainly," said Wenz, swallowing a mouthful of Cucumbertini, taking a step away from the dumfounded conversation circle.

"The brief word," said the large man, "is Mrs. Sauermash, Gloria, who you met at the entry, suspects you are possibly at an incorrect address. May I see your invitation please?"

"By all meansh, my good man ," said Wenz, presenting Alex's invitation with a flourish; realizing he was slurring his words.

The large man opened the envelope and scanned the insert. "Yes, the establishment for this address is about one mile down the road on your left. You are the third person this evening stopping here in

error. We are sorry we did not realize and let you know sooner. We will be happy to escort you to your car so you can be on your way to the correct function.”

“Oops,” said Wenz. “I should have known when the bartender made me the Cumbertini. Most parties I go to they throw you down the fucking front steps if you ask for a drink like a Cumbertini.” Suddenly he could no longer pronounce Cucumbertini.

“Language please, sir,” cautioned the large man, taking Wenz by the elbow. The other large man without speaking, assisted Wenz' other elbow. “We'll get you on your way directly,” they propelled him toward the front door.

“Have a pleasant remainder of your evening,” the large man said. The front door shut behind Wenz. The valets ignored him and he walked down the driveway and up the road to his car.

In the Fairlane he turned the key and the Holman Moody engine rumbled to life. *Those fucking Cumbertinis were great.* He lit the spliff. Probably a couple hits left. He wrenched the steering wheel right and shoved the stick into reverse. The Fairlane backed down into the ditch, looking deadly, squatting momentarily at the bottom, its abdomen thrumming like a resting wasp. He shifted into second for traction, spun the engine up and popped the clutch. Screaming indignantly the car rocketed down the drainage trench splashing water, strewing discarded beer cans and fast food wrappers back onto the hood of the Porsche, splattering mud. He shifted to third, twisting the steering wheel left. The car exploded up the embankment in a shower of debris and squealed away down the road.

I should have asked if I could take the rest of the cucumber along, he thought. *They seemed nice. I'm sure it wouldn't have been a problem.*

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Approximately 48 seconds later, or four 12 second quarter-miles, he arrived at the 'correct address.' He kept meaning to get over to the local drag strip and race the Fairlane but on weekends he usually had a hangover. More convenient to settle for speed on the street.

A few squatty Mercury coupes, some open-engine hot rods, two pick-ups with chrome tractor trailer exhaust stacks and an assortment of sporty cars were parked on the lawn at the correct address. A light on the front porch looked to be one of those motion-sensitive barnyard floods. It was being kept lit by a drunk sitting on a step rocking back and forth moaning. Wenz climbed to the porch without speaking. The guy didn't look interested in small talk.

He knocked and a hippy-dippy girl in a flowered Empire dress, hem reaching the floor, opened the door and gushed, "Hi stranger." Accurate because Wenz had no idea who she was. "Who are you?"

"I'm Wenz. Wenz Smith. A friend of Alexis."

"Come on in. Any friend of Alex's is welcome here. I think she told us you were coming. I forget." Wenz noticed her pupils were a bit big. "I'm Gloria. Call me Glo, everyone does."

"Pleased to meet you Gloria," said Wenz. I just met another Gloria down the road. She seemed nice."

This got an immediate rise out of Gloria number two. "That bitch. She's the other side of nice. She calls the Sheriff and complains about our parties. Now you remind me, I should call the Sheriff and complain about her. If nothing else she's made several of our guests turn left at the wrong driveway. She's creating a fucking road

hazard." Gloria two turned and wandered off into the party, presumably in search of a phone.

She was replaced by an attractive taller woman with dark hair and normal size pupils, not so hippy-dippy, slender, like a runner. Wenz coughed, startled. "Hi. I'm Stephanie, or Steve, take your pick," the runner said. "I live here. I heard you tell Glo you were subbing for Alex tonight? You're a writer or something?"

"Yeah. Content. Some stories, poems, shit like that. I do work for Alex's company once in a while. How about you?"

"I'm a recording engineer in a studio downtown. Gospel mostly, a little Christian Rock, the occasional demo CD."

"Whoa. Sounds interesting."

"It's not. Too many stiff necks and shalt-nots. It's a pain in the ass. I'm trying to get into a studio in Memphis."

"That'll be a big move."

"Not really. I rent. I'm unattached. Don't own anything. Did a little decorating, some plants. My stuff will all fit in a UHaul trailer. Wenz looked past her at plants hung from ceiling hooks, flourishing in pots in corners. Colorful pictures, Navajo wall hangings and what looked to be a couple of antique schoolhouse clocks, the kind the teacher key-wound once a week.

"Nice" Wenz said. "You've done a nice job. Looks real homey."

"Thank you," said Steve, paying him measurably closer attention than Gloria number one. "Can we get you a drink?"

"Sure. Be nice. Got any Vodka?"

“Nope, but we have the next best thing. A jar of white lightning from Seth my neighbor down the road.”

“Christ. Does broomstick-up-her-ass Gloria next door know there's a Still on her block?”

“Everybody knows. Seth's been making moonshine for over thirty years. No one's ever found the Still. Plus, the product's good. No one except Gloria is interested in seeing anything happen to Seth, I expect Sheriff Bill included. Don't go back and tell Gloria.” Wenz and Steve laughed. Newly introduced, already conspirators.

On the kitchen counter sat a ball mason jar filled with clear moonshine. A rubber gasket rimmed lid with a spring clip lay next to a steel shot measure on a chain. Stephanie dropped the shot measure into the jar like a well bucket, pulled it out with the chain and poured the white liquor over chipped ice in a jelly jar. “Anything else?” She asked. “This stuff's a little rough straight up.”

“Got a cucumber?” Wenz asked. “Maybe a lemon or a lime? Some sugar?”

“I've got cucumber and zucchinis coming out my butt this year,” laughed Steve. “No lemon but I've got some limes for the gin and tonic crowd.” She looked interested.

Wenz didn't waste any time with bullshit, mashed up the cucumber slices, squeezed the lime wedge and added some sugar. Close enough. Took a sip. Not perfect but almost. Stephanie watched him. “Never seen this one before” she said. Tasted it. “Very good.” Tasted again.

Wenz mashed a few more cucumber slices, squeezed some limes. He noticed how well Steve's jeans fit. How her breasts weren't too

big and squishy like most of the woman at the first party. How he didn't seem able to say 'Seth' very clearly which was a pain in the ass as he tried to compliment Seth's moonshine. Steve said, "Make me one of those."

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A slice of sunshine crawling up his leg into his eye woke Wenz in bed next to Steve. Wenz scrunched his eyes and tried to remember the previous night. No way. Steve was still asleep so he couldn't ask. He peeked under the covers and thought, *well, well.*

Steve woke up yelling. After she got focused on what was happening to her she wasn't mad, just happily yelling in general. Not to be impolite, Wenz joined in. Their breath may have been a bit spicy but neither noticed. Both were experiencing flashbacks from the night before.

"I've been thinking," Wenz later said hopefully. "When you go up to Memphis I could look for work up there too. I can get a job writing content most anywhere."

Stephanie didn't answer. She had the covers pulled over her head and was giggling. It sounded to Wenz like a 'maybe' giggle.

Out on the grass the Fairlane sparkled in the sun.

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A clear bright Tuesday noon sun cooked the road to Memphis. No traffic marred the view or prompted Wenz to make an unneeded pass. Steve, in the shotgun seat, was humming. Wenz could see her lips moving and her throat pulsing, no melody audible above the wind noise. It was enough she was happy.

He sure was. He had gone directly from shiftless shit kicker straight to the up escalator, driving along in his funky car, his tires singing on the road accompanied by the catchy beats of random cracks and bumps passing under the taut chassis too fast to see.

Steve over there with her eyes half closed drew him as if he were looking for a twinkle of something to dive for at the bottom of a crystal lake. Every two or three miles he fought back the urge to pull onto the shoulder and grab her; not even turn off the engine; let the Fairlane roll and drift as it would while he enfolded her.

Oblivious to his Cro-Magnon dreams, she hummed and twirled her hair with her right index finger, elbow resting on the door. She had never been so satisfied with a man. Couldn't say how or why it happened with this man. She had just fallen into him and stuck. He didn't seem her type with the snarling car and hopelessly bizzare drink, that cucumbertini. But stuck she was.

She'd been down enough roads not to ask too many questions of life. Twirled her hair and felt the heavy breeze. Didn't thank anyone, or anything either. They had just gotten lucky. It happened. Like in Vegas. Everyone gets lucky. The trick is to hang on, not let the House have it back. A problem for another day. For now they were close enough to be each the other.

The ride for him was a slow build of confidence. Each mile stacking bricks of a new beginning. He knew he could get jobs writing content anywhere. What he saw now out on the shimmering road was a skyline. A shimmering thing taking shape in the roaring sun. Something bigger to be built, an eye catcher. Like the Holman Moody Fairlane. Something with a little less content; a lot more power.

