

# Dakota

by Roger Weaver

I am warming up the Hotel Hugo courtesy shuttle van when Victor the front desk manager comes striding out waving his arms asking me why I haven't backed up yet. Victor says I'm always in my own world when I should be paying attention to the work at hand, swinging open the hotel doors, tipping my cap and saying 'good afternoon Mister and Mrs. Pierdominici, enjoying the warm weather?' But when Victor is around me I feel like a soldier in the movie 'Apocalypse Now'. "If you don't know what's going on just nod and smile like you do." he says, though when I nod and smile at him he says "What the hell is wrong with you?" A question from Victor is a pin pulled out of a grenade in a world that has lost meaning. So when Victor questions me I just smile and nod, put the van in reverse, release the brake, hear a sharp yip, sense the wheels clearing a small bump, and run over a dog.

As I stand staring down at the gray-haired body, now released from its mortal leash, tongue lolling out towards the asphalt, the monster of guilt crawls up my legs and forces its way into my heart. I console myself that a low-down dog at least lived in the moment, wasn't thinking about his next meal, and didn't waste his time being self-reflective. Because in the end you will get run over by a neurotic valet who was just following orders. And then I remember Robin Williams in the movie 'The Dead Poet's Society' admonishing his students to "seize the day" and I am wondering how *I* would seize the day when I am spun around, my face greets a fast approaching fist, and I black out.

"Aaron get up. You're covered in dog's blood." I hear Victor grunt. I can hear some kind of scuffling going on, Victor cursing, another man shouting. I try to screw my eyeballs back in straight. Eventually I register Victor rolling around with an over-weight, long-haired, bearded dude in a thread-bare Civil War re-enactment t-shirt, cut-off denim shorts, and flip-flops. Victor's hands are wrapped around the guy's unwashed neck.

“Fac yu.” croaks the dude. He has one of Victor's jacket lapels wadded up in each fist.

“We're sorry about your dog, sir,” says Victor, “but you are causing a disturbance. I'm going to have to ask you to calm down.”

I raise myself up on one elbow. I am sitting on a mushed dog. I shuffle my butt over a few feet. I put my hand to my face, feel one eye swelling. My teeth hurt. “Sorry I ran over your dog.” I say through the corner of my mouth. “Hey Victor, it's alright, he's just angry. I probably deserved that punch.”

Victor loosens his grip a bit as he turns his head to address me. “I was the one who hit you, you idiot. You're lucky I don't fire your ass too. Go get a mop and bucket and clean up that mess. And find a fresh uniform to change into— you look like shit.”

“I'm going to sue your douche bag ass,” wheezes the man, “and then I'm going to make you apologize for being a black hole of suckage.”

“I'm afraid it's our word against yours *sir*.” Victor replies, and with his free hand pulls out the man's wallet and holds up his driver's license. “Toby Smith.” he reads from the card. “Would you like our valet to bring you a doggie bag for your leftovers Mr. Smith?” Victor and the man are still struggling as I slink back into the hotel.

When I return Victor is leaning against the grand piano in the cologne and chlorine scented entryway, chatting amicably with a young buxom police officer. As I pass by under the chandelier with my mop and bucket his eyebrow arches and the eye beneath it widens then shoots me an icy ray of derision that freezes my brain.

I feel like I'm watching myself play myself in a movie. I think about Pee Wee Herman watching the movie of his own life and in the movie he plays a bellhop who has one brief scene interacting with the male lead— a handsome, confident, and successful Hollywood star. I imagine I will end up not like Pee Wee but like Sting in the movie 'Quadrophenia'— a supposedly tough and rebellious leader of a teen gang who supports himself as a boot-licking bellhop. There

can be no escape for the bellhop in his scene— he's locked into his role.

I step outside into the sunshine. A few yellow leaves swirl past me on the sidewalk. Mr. Toby Smith waves me over towards the police cruiser in which he is sitting. He slips a business card through the gap in the window. The card reads: 'Mr. Toby Smith— Donut Robot Repair Services'

"Aaron," he says, reading my nametag, "I need you to bring my dog's remains out to my property Sunday morning for a proper burial." I don't know what to say to that so I just nod and smile. "You know I took issue with him taking you out, that's why he went ballistic. All I wanted to do was use the bathroom." He paused. "Have any cash on you?"

"A twenty, what's it for?"

"To bribe the guards so they'll look the other way when I make my big escape." he says sarcastically. "How about we say it's for funeral expenses? Twenty bucks for funeral expenses and I owe you beer for your troubles?"

I find the twenty in my wallet and pass it through the window.

"So you'll bring me my dog's body?"

"Didn't mean to kill your dog Mr. Smith."

"Let me see that card back." I hand him the card. He takes out a ballpoint pen, scribbles on the card then pushes the card back out through the window slot. He's crossed out 'Smith'. "That's my name." he says.

I go off to swab up the parking space of dog's blood. After I deposit the carcass in an extra-tough garbage bag I go down to the laundry room and scoop some complimentary ice in with the body. Instead of throwing out the bag in the dumpster though, I slip it in to the kitchen walk-in freezer being careful to hide it where it won't be mistaken for a pot roast.

At dawn on Sunday I put on a simple black suit and tie then go back to the hotel for the bag. The dog has frozen into a blob-shaped block. I slip the bag into my shoulder bag, hop on a Metro bus, and head out to Toby's place just outside the city limits in Toledo. About

half-way there the ice has thawed enough that the passengers, then the bus driver, begin to look in my direction. The driver dumps me off on a commercial strip by a Texaco station. "Nothing personal." he says to me.

I am standing on the corner for a few minutes when an actual service attendant in a white uniform with a Texaco monogrammed star sewed on to the breast pocket approaches me and asks if he can be of help. Behind him I can see a flock of identical Texaco station attendants wearing identical white jumpsuits following a mother mechanic carrying a clipboard under her wing as she quacks instructions to them. "No, thanks, I'm fine." I say.

He replies with that "okie dokie" pointer finger to the nose gesture, then backpedals to rejoin his flock.

Eighteen wheelers rumble by. Thousands of commuter cars whizz towards unknown destinations. I think about hitch-hiking. People in independent films are always hitch-hiking, especially in Jim Jarmusch films. Aren't airy dreamers like me supposed to be free-spirited hitch-hikers? In my black suit and tie I could be in a Jim Jarmusch film I think. I sling my bag over my shoulder and stick out my thumb like a character in a Jim Jarmusch film. I wish I had brought dark sunglasses to match my outfit.

I think about Richard Linklater who plays himself in the first scene of his first movie, 'Slacker'. Like me he steps off of a bus but unlike me he hails a cab and during the cab ride has a one-way conversation with the cab driver where Richard Linklater talks on-and-on about the cab ride and all the other possible actions he could have taken other than hail that particular cab and then, as he's getting out of the cab at the scene's end he says "I should have stayed at the bus station." And I know I couldn't have stayed on the bus because the dog smelled god-awful but the thought occurs to be that I might have been better off *not* taking the bus *at all* and I wonder if I'll regret coming out to visit this guy who, for all I know, might be a serial killer.

I don't want to think about serial killer movies so I go into the gas station and buy a pair of sunglasses. They are not cheap but I'm

hoping it is money well spent and my classic 'sunglasses and suit' look will pay off.

Moments after I stick out my thumb two young women in a tow-truck slow down to get a look at me. Curly red hair and Ray-bans, they look like Thelma and Louise from the movie 'Thelma and Louise' excepting that Thelma and Louise didn't drive a tow truck. I walk beside the truck as they creep forward.

"Hiya," I say. Louise in the passenger seat leans out the window and looks at me over her sunglasses.

"Where you heading?"

"I'm late for a dog's funeral." I say looking over *my* sunglasses.

"Hmm, sounds depressing."

"It might be an adventure. What's it like in Toledo?"

"More desperate and boring but desperate and boring is almost the same as depressing isn't it?"

I rather agree with that statement but agreeing won't do me any good so I say "Death can be a new beginning." She turns and says something to Thelma. When she turns back she says "You'll be wanting to know that we stole this truck."

"Is that so?" I say. The light ahead turns green and traffic began to surge forward again. I started jogging.

"Death can be a new beginning." she says.

"So which way *is* Toledo?" I say, "Are we heading in the right direction?"

"Yeah, this way— say, what is that stench?"

I am almost running now. I don't want to say "dead dog" so I stop jogging and stand in place. "A dead dog!" I yell, raising both of my arms up in the air like antenna attempting to radio out an urgent message. I can see her arms curled quizzically. Then she retreats into the window and the truck plunges forward into the river of vehicles.

I flip open my cell phone and call Toby. Half-an-hour later Toby rolls up in a dented, once-white truck. When he brakes to a stop the passenger side door screeches open and a large television and a few

milk cartons fall out, crashing to the pavement in an explosion of glass and dairy product.

"Dramatic entrance." he says looking sheepish. He too wears a black suit and tie but also a top hat and monocle.

"You can just put the remains in the back, I'm sure they stink to high heaven by now." I withdraw the wet lump from my shoulder bag and deposit it on the bed of the truck amidst a small army of full, five-gallon water jugs overseen by a high-backed motorized wheelchair, covered in a plastic tarp.

I look up into the truck. Instead of a seat Toby is sitting on a cushion atop two plastic milk crates. Scattered underfoot are Styrofoam cups, egg cartons, half-eaten food, fantasy role-playing figurines, and beer cans. I see a dinner plate sized hole where the passenger seat would have been.

"Sorry about that. I was expecting you could sit on the television." He kicks some debris into the hole. As I clamber up I notice dark circles under his eyes; he catches me looking at him. "Ah yes, I was in jail for the night. But," he says brightly, "The fuckers dropped the charges."

I sit down. Pressing myself against the rear of the cabin to avoid the hole I look around for something to hold onto, grab hold of a knotted rope tied to the door frame. As Toby spins out onto the road the door swings open almost pulling me out of the cab. I fall to the floor, find my ass wedged into the hole.

"Ho ho," he chuckles, "You'll get road rash that way. Pull on that rope or I'm going have to attend *two* funerals today." Toby reaches over, grabs the rope, and helps me yank the door closed. "You'll get the hang of it, just put your weight behind it."

I lean back against the rope and pluck myself out of the hole. Then I stand up and squat over it, bending my legs for balance, surfing with the rock and roll of the truck's shock absorbers. "It's strange," I yell over the shake and rattle of the steel frame, "but I can't think of a movie scene that reminds me of this moment."

"Oh," says Toby, "you like movies?"

"This isn't 'Road Warrior'."

“No. Liked the dog in that one though.”

“Oh yeah.”

“I’ll have to think about that one.” says Toby.

Still holding the door closed I can see us turning off from the main street on to a narrower hard-packed rock-studded dirt track. As we rumble along the floor pitches and rolls so that it is all I can do to stay on my feet. Hitting the gas as we drive over a rise, Toby launches the truck into the air which sends me flying into the roof then crashing back down on the floor as we land. He hits the brake and we come swerving to a stop beside a normal-looking mailbox with “Smith” painted on it. The red flag is up.

Toby rolls down his window and opens the mail flap. He pulls out a medium-sized cardboard box with ‘Amazon.com’ printed on the side. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out a hunting knife and snaps it open. “Oh, please, please.” he says. He slices through the packing tape then pries open the flaps. Inside is another box, this one of colored cardboard and plastic packaging. He lifts it up out of the box and examines it.

“A George Lukas action figure,” he whispers, “in mint condition. Only fifty were made and only ten are known to exist. This, however,” he suddenly shouts, throwing the box aside, “is a knock-off masquerading as the real thing! The paper script in his hand is absent and the golden seal along the box edge has been replaced by common packing tape!” His head slumps forward and comes to rest on the steering wheel.

I don't know what to say so I stare out the windows. Delicate spring flowers are budding in the grass to either side and I can sense the subtle movements of insects, birds, and other small animals unseen in the bramble. I notice we have come to rest on a dirt patch that serves as a parking space. Up ahead a short gravel walkway leads to a whitewashed wooden ramp, then I discern a small moss-covered house camouflaged by fir trees and confined within an old chain-link fence.

“I’m over it.” Toby says snapping upright. He struggles out of the cab then waddles to the back of the truck while I retrieve my bag

from underneath the scattered bottles of water. Toby unlatches the rear gate. Reaching into the back, he slides out an aluminum ramp, attaches it to the rear edge, and then climbs the ramp to the cab.

“That’s the Holodeck.” he says, pointing to the wheelchair. He saunters over, pulls aside the tarp, then lowers himself into the seat, filling up all the available space. “The eulogy for the funeral is on my computer.” he says, directing my gaze to a computer monitor mounted to the side of the wheelchair. “I’ve set up this wheelchair so that I can organize myself online *hands-free* by wearing this.” He lifts up an elastic headband with an attached plastic prong. He fits it over his head under the top hat so that the prong seems to emerge from his forehead. He cranes his neck forward, tapping at the keys with the prong, and the two computer screens ping and light up. Toby beams at me.

He takes hold of a thin red joystick control and the chair lurches forward with a whirring sound. Now I can see that a couple of leather saddle bags are tied to the back of the seat. He slows to the edge of the ramp then gingerly pops over the edge with a clang and rattles down the ramp.

The door to the house is open so we motor into the kitchen. On a grease-encrusted stove, a half-dozen pale hot dogs boil in a handle-less pot. Water hisses and sputters as it spills on to the glowing orange-black coil.

Toby turns off the pot, and with his fingers snatches the hot dogs out of the boiling water. “Ow, hot hot.” he says juggling the hot dogs. He heads over towards a black and white television playing in an adjacent room. “Grab me a beer outta the fridge will ya?” he says while attempting to snatch bites of hot dog.

I open the refrigerator. “I don’t see any beer.”

“It’s in the bowl next to the other leftovers.”

I reach in, take a bowl out. The beer is the consistency of egg yolk. I walk over and set the bowl on a tray table beside the Holodeck. I decide that Toby is a mighty globe of flesh. Oprah is on the television.

“You’re watching Oprah.” I observe.



Toby reaches over for the bowl which then appears to orbit around to the dark side of him. I think: 'the spaceship and her crew were never seen again'. We watch Oprah for a few minutes while Toby finishes off the hot dogs. During this time I think about the first Star Wars movie and imagine Tie fighters and X-wings flying around Toby. When Oprah goes to a commercial break he turns back to me and nods with his probe towards a garage workroom off the kitchen. I follow him out.

He motors down a ramp and into a garage that's been taken over as a workroom. "This is where the magic of donut robot repair takes place." he says sweeping his arm to indicate multiple industrial machines buried in piles of tools then covered with role-playing game books, energy drink cans, moldy yarn art and wilting plants. Just outside on a bed of sawdust stand ten or more giant carved wooden bears, each of them with two upraised paws. Beyond I spy a quarter-acre lot of dry, cracked concrete surrounded by corroded objects— metal pipes, circular saw blades, rain gutters, weather vanes, industrial sinks, railroad ties and more, all encircled by rusting fence. It looks as if a hippie tornado has passed through leaving behind a swath of junk.

"These are my bears." says Toby, getting out of his chair to pose with a chainsaw before an eight foot tall, totem of a bear. The bear's left paw grips a carved beer can; the right paw is an outstretched paw. "Right now I can only carve upraised paws." he says, demonstrating the technique with the chainsaw. "This one though, is the piece-de-resistance" he says with great pride "it's my beer bear catapult— and can be operated by remote control."

"Shit."

"Shit is right Aaron, check these out." Toby picks up one of about a dozen cantaloupe-sized brown balls wrapped in plastic. "These are my shit cannonballs. They're made from dog or cow shit." He stands on a box, places the shit ball in the bear's open paw. "This whole project started two years ago when I caught our neighbor kicking Dakota for straying onto his property." He picks up a remote control, wiggles a switch and the bear's arm begins to ratchet backwards

until it is cocked behind the bear's ear. He presses a button on the remote and with a 'thwuck' the bear launches the cannonball over the horizon. "Now," says Toby, "whenever I'm in a bad mood now I just lob a 25 pound shit cannonball over the fence and I feel much better."

He plops back down in his chair. "Remote control." he says, arching one eyebrow. He fiddles with the toggle switch. I think to myself that he is Willie Wonka and I am Charlie and we're in the Chocolate Factory. "Aaron, before we bury him, we need to read the Will aloud. Would you be so kind?" He turns one of the screens in my direction.

"I didn't know dogs could have wills." I say, trying to sound credulous and conciliatory at the same time.

"Yes, of course." Toby sighs, frowning. "As he aged we spoke about his eventual death more and more and the result was he communicated to me his preferred arrangements for the after-life."

I decide that it is pointless and not at all prudent to ask the questions that are coming to mind. I lean forward and read off the screen.

*I, the dog known as Dakota, ask that I be buried in accordance with Lakota-Sioux traditions but that my skull be retained and remain with my long-time companion, Mr. Toby Smith so that my spirit may more freely pass between the world of the living and the dead. I leave my sole worldly possessions— collar, leash, Frisbee, and food bowl— to charity. This is my last will and testament on this day, December 15, 1997.*

"Your dog was a native American." I say.

"Normally he would have to stay in his tipi overnight to commune with the ancestral spirits but since he never lived in a tipi, we can go right to the burial. However, in accordance with his wishes I need to saw off his skull and let it sit in some hydrogen peroxide to bleach it."

He nabs a rusty shovel, holds it out in my direction. "If you leave Dakota here I'll deal with the head, get a few errands done. Would you be okay with digging a hole for Dakota out by that oak tree?"

“Okay.”

I tramp out to a gigantic oak rooted in one distant corner of the property. I dig a dog-sized hole, feeling awkward about my abilities. I try to make the bottom level so Dakota can sleep without undue lumps. But every time I remove a rock I have to level out the soil again. I feel like I am digging a hole for a Saint Bernard.

I finish with the sun overhead. I can see Toby crossing the field in the Holodeck. About fifty feet from the tree the ground becomes uneven so he slows to a halt.

“Damn it,” he says, “I can't get this thing to go any farther *and* I don't have a way to print out the eulogy. I'm going to have to read it from over here. Just listen carefully okay? I don't want to have to shout.”

“Wait,” I say, “We need to put him in first.”

“Oh, right.”

The plastic bag is tied to the back of the wheelchair. I can smell rotten dog baking in the bag from where I stand. I stride over, swiftly unhook the bag then dash back to the hole, where I lower it in. I start to shovel some dirt on to cover up the smell but think that might prevent Dakota from hearing his own eulogy so I stop.

“Okay,” I say, trying not to gag, “we're ready.”

He angles the computer monitor to cut down on the sun's glare, re-adjusts his monocle then reads aloud.

“Dakota, my long-time companion, was a rebellious variation on *Canis lupis familiaris*, the generic domestic dog. Dakota lived much of his life on the back of a motorcycle exploring America's highways. His exploits include chasing after gophers (and killing one), climbing mountains, and canoeing down the Columbia. He heard wolves tell stories and once or twice bit the hand that fed him. He shook hands with President Jimmy Carter and had his photo taken with Ben & Jerry of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. Today we lay him to rest beneath his favorite resting spot (aside from his favorite resting spot in front of the wood stove), and wish his body a safe journey back to the ancestors. We know that he will find his way despite the fact his head will stay on my dashboard to guide us in our quest against little

toadies and those who break solemn treaties, and *towards* our vision of Thy Free Lunch. Rest in peace my furry friend.”

Toby wipes away the tears with his hand, then looks up from the monitor. “Let’s have lunch.” he says, “Then we have to go for beer.”

“And get back to the city for my shift.” I say.

“Right, its all part of the grand plan.”

Back at the garage Toby tells me to toss aside the shovel and grab two black doctor’s bags from a shelf. I lug them back to the kitchen where he has deep-fried the equivalent of six or seven chickens and filled up two KFC buckets with the results. “I recycle the buckets.” Toby explains. Since I gotta get you back to work, I decided we should just do take-out.” He stacks the buckets of chicken on his lap and says “C’mom.”

Back at the truck I realize that I can turn a water jug upside-down, stick it in the hole, and use it as a seat. I still have to hold the door closed but I can eat chicken with my left hand and the bucket between my knees. We take the truck back up the country lane and head back toward the city though this time Toby makes a detour into a nearby suburb.

We pass by white picket fences lined with flowers, plastic recycling bins neatly set out beside crushed pebble driveways. Toby slows down across the street from a house with a driveway that has been newly asphalted. The garage door is open and I can hear a ballgame playing on an unseen radio. I can see some boxes stacked up beside a refrigerator, a weight set, some concrete blocks, a basketball.

I get the sense that we are about to do something stupid like the ‘blues brothers’ in the movie ‘The Blues Brothers’. Leaving the truck running, Toby hobbles out and strolls serpentine across the street, ducks into the garage. He emerges trotting from the garage with a six-pack of beer. Without looking back he rounds the truck and rescales the truck. “I’m back!” he says passing me the beer. Just then a beefy man brandishing a baseball bat runs from the garage and down the driveway toward us; his teeth are clenched and his neck muscles are red and taut. “Hey you! Motherfucker!” he yells.

Toby slams the door then releases the emergency brake. He throws it into reverse as the dude hits his stride at the bottom of the driveway. I'm thrown into the dashboard and fried chicken rains down as Toby hits the brake and spins us around. I hear a series of metallic thumps, the dude swearing, and then I lose my footing as we lurch forward. When I do scramble to my feet again the guy's face is contorted in my window as he runs alongside. We are going too fast for him though and it's obvious he cannot stop us. As we pull ahead I hear him curse one final time and the baseball bat crashes through the rear window sending glass shards over us, the chicken, and the beer.

We don't speak as we make our way back to the city but I do open two beers and we drink while Toby drives. I sigh once, just before I take my first sip. I feel like Otto in the movie 'Repo Man'. The repo man says to Otto—'A repo man spends his life getting *into* tense situations.' So Otto becomes a "repo man" and life becomes "intense". But his punk friend turns to a life of crime and ends up dead of gun shot wounds. 'I blame society.' he says, 'Society made me what I am.' Is that who I want to be?

About half-way back Toby turns in to a gas station to piss and while he's in the bathroom I buy another six-pack for him. When he returns I'm sitting on the milk crates. He works his way up onto the water jug. When I hold up the six-pack he mumbles "You shouldn't have." and automatically pops open another can. I'm amazed that he has lost neither monocle nor top hat.

When I get us back on the highway he snaps open one of the medical bags. He reaches in and pulls out a small wet skull. "Dakota," he says "needs to dry." He holds it out the window for a few minutes, lets the lukewarm breeze whistle through the whitened bone. The setting sun is illuminating the sky when Toby places Dakota on the dashboard panorama. "He's going to show me where to go." Toby intones.

We drive into darkness as the city lights come into view. Toby stares at Dakota's skull and drinks beer. "Sorry if I scared you back there." he says at one point. "The good times aren't all la-te-dah."

We pass the next few miles thinking our own thoughts, Toby's punctuating his by swallows of beer. As we approach downtown we notice a few skyscrapers go dark. "Looks like a partial blackout." I suggest. I find a parking spot across the street from the hotel. I get out while Toby climbs over to take the wheel.

Toby slurs, "Sir your cologne recalls eau de dead dog." "Thank you so much." I reply with a flourish of the arm and a quick bow. I turn away, then dodge traffic across the street, try to sober up.

In the employee bathrooms I change out of my suit into my valet uniform, stash my suit in a locker, and hurry up to the main floor.

The lobby hums with light conversation. Tuxedos and formal dresses swish and sashay from the lobby bar to the foyer, the hubbub punctuated by the boom of an emcee's microphone in the function room where the bride and groom will be swapping cake and stories. While I'm checking the task list posted in the coat-check in, two clean-cut security goons pass by and one of them says with a smirk, "Victor says 'manage yourself'."

For the next few hours I check in coats and hats and furs, then escort wedding guests to their rooms until it's time for my dinner break. I take the elevators down to the employee break room, unseal a container of ramen and microwave a cup of water. I'm sipping broth when a be speckled old man using a cane totters into the doorframe. "Excuse me," he says "but I'm giving away free pizza. This is my lovely assistant, Ramona." Ramona, who I recognize as one of the cleaning ladies, appears from behind him and throws open the lid. Inside the box is a pepperoni pizza. "No thanks," I say, "I think I'll stick with my ramen."

"Your loss." says the old man. "By the way, can you tell me where the hotel manager's room is?" I've practically drawn him a map by the time I figure out it is Toby in disguise. He's clean shaven and wearing a gray wig.

"She's not bad looking, huh?" he says.

"Toby," I hiss, "what are you doing down here?"

"I guess I need your help Aaron. I've come this far but it must be a sign to bump into you."

"What in the hell are you talking about? You're going to get me fired and they'll arrest you for trespassing!"

"I've been wandering around down here for the last few hours and done alright so far. I've seen a lot. The men of the wedding party lounging in the steam room discussing derivatives. Carlos the maintenance man, after buffing the floors, reads Dostoevsky in the boiler room. And I met Ramona organizing supplies in a cleaning closet. She's gonna meet me in the morning, come out to stay with me in Toledo. Have you been down to floor B4? I need to go down there"

"What? No. You need a pass code to go to B4."

"No problem. I watched someone punch in their number— it's 5867."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"I'm not. The Holodeck is just down the hall."

"You are shitting me." I open the door. Peering down the hallway I can see the wheelchair by the elevators.

"Listen Aaron, if we're caught you can just tell them you found me wandering the hallways. Show me to Victor's office."

"Jesus Christ no, bad idea."

"C'mon." he says. He tip-toes down the linoleum tiled hallway looking left and right as he goes. I am still in shock. I watch him as he flops into the Holodeck then spins around. As he hits the elevator down button I find myself sprinting down the hallway after him. "Toby," I say, as loudly as I dare, "wait."

"Okay," I say holding open the doors, "official story: I found you breaching security on B4 and I followed you to make sure you didn't do anything." Toby punches in the four-digit code. "And one more thing— the beer and keg storage rooms are located right across from his office but you can *forget about them* because they're protected by an invisible laser burglary alarm. Okay?"

The doors close and we lower to B4. "Sounds good." he says.

The doors shush open. Two young security goons in blue blazers, ties, and gold-plated name tags sit in folding chairs to either side of

the walkway. One strokes his bearded chin, the clean-shaven one twirls a ring of keys on his finger.

"B4. What's your business here?" says the bearded guard.

"Ah, I need to show Mr. Patterson to Victor's office. But I can handle it."

"He's upstairs at the front desk." says the key twirler.

"We'll just wait outside his office until he returns," I say, "No emergency."

"I'll confess everything." says Toby with a laugh, throt-ting forward with the Holodeck. The guards give him a suspicious look but they let us pass.

Following my directions Toby heads down into the tangle of hallways that lead to Victor's office. We wander by a doorway to a wood paneled room, a remnant from the old hotel the new one was built on. Now it's a storage room for stacked chairs and folded tables. We're in a long narrow hallway near to our goal when the lights go out. I hear shouts and curses.

"Shit," I murmer, "rolling blackout." I bump into the Holodeck. "Fuck."

"Stand still" says Toby, "—and wait."

A few seconds later a faint light appears in the dark— Toby has a strapped on a headlamp and also the probe. He looks like Doctor Strangelove in the movie 'Dr. Strangelove' if Doctor Strangelove were a giant cockroach. As we creep forward in the murk, a silent catering crew passes by us rolling trays of pale hors d'oeuvres. A ghostly white haired waiter emerges before us with a silver tray hoisted above his head. He squeezes past us, moans about the inconvenience, then disappears. I am thankful when we reach Victor's office. It is a normal looking door with a stiff, normal looking padlock on it.

"Well?" I ask, "What's next?" Toby replies by reaching back into one of the leather saddlebags and pulling out a large pair of bolt cutters. "They're not the Jaws-of-Life but close." he says. Then he snaps through the lock which clangs to the floor.



I don't dare follow Toby into Victor's office so I stay on the threshold while Toby bumps around in the half-light. After a minute or two I hear him whispering for me. I lean in, see his glow over by Victor's desk. "What?" I whisper back.

"Come over here. I want to show you something."

I'm nervous but I scamper over to the Holodeck and peer over his shoulder. "Look." he says. He holds up a DVD in a plastic case; on the DVD in marker are the words 'dog death accidental'. "Shit," I say.

"Shit is right." He feels around the side of one computer, opens the drive, and pops in the disc. He taps the screen a few times with the probe. I hear some distant conversation outside in the dark. "Hurry up." I say to the computer, to Toby.

The video screen appears on the monitor. I recognize the front of the hotel. The quality is poor, scratchy. But I can make out the morning, can make out Dakota tied to the valet parking sign. He strains toward the hotel on the leash, and although he looks from side-to-side at the occasional passerby he's still searching for Toby somewhere on the alien surface of the building. Then we see Victor emerging from the building his arms gesticulating but I am invisible, notable for my absence, hidden in the shuttle van. I try to think of a black and white film that compares and cannot. I think about silent films, any silent film at all. I think about silent films.

But before I put the van in reverse we see Dakota turn his head from the building, turn away towards the street. There is something that catches his eye and he steps out into the street. The leash strains the other way. It's impossible to see what it is, what he is sniffing at. And then we see him vanish under the van. We don't see his death, except in a sense. I look away, let the rest flicker with the headlamp against the walls. I hear Toby remove the disc, replace it on the desk. "C'mon." he says, turning the Holodeck around.

He whirs out of the room. By the time I catch up to him he's across the hall, squinting into the keg room. Before I can register a protest he darts forward into the room and emerges a moment later,

standing next to the Holodeck and its new passenger: a full barrel of Guinness Stout.

I lead us in the direction of the underground parking garage. As we move past a bank of circuit breakers the lights flicker to life. Toby switches off his lamp, stores his head prong. "How much farther?" he asks, putting his sports jacket over the beer. "Just a short way." I reply. "I'll go up ahead to make sure the coast is clear." I open the door and he follows me through the parking garage, then press the button that opens up the automatic garage door. Glancing out into the greasy back alleyway I can see the employee smoking area off to the left, the garbage and the recycling bins, pallets leaning up against the building.

"Go right", I say, and good luck." Toby fishes into a saddlebag and comes out with a George Lukas action figure. "This is for you." he says. "He can be your personal guide wherever you go." He sticks George feet first into my breast pocket. George's arms are raised up like one of Toby's bears, like he's about to plunge down over the edge at the beginning of a rollercoaster ride. "Thanks." I say.

"Use the force dude" he says, then gives me that arched eyebrow look. The gate rattles down and I return from whence I came.

