

On Deadline

by Jonathan Sapers

Descent into Dixie or
Life Before Mumfrey: Reality or Dream?

By Daily Drone, Staff Smith Writer

How did he get here? What led him? D.D. Smith, formerly college student. Dreaming of dazzling future life. Departs Metropolis, heads South. Why south? Good question. You should be a reporter.

But perhaps D.D. should not. This is the difference; the point of the story. The nut graf.

Last innocent act: Opened a bank account. Bought a cat. Set up house or really, apartment. Arrived for work at the Mumfrey Daily Recorder.

Mumfrey. Poised, dancing on the edge of relevancy. Home of Mumfrey State College, the Mumfrey International Airport, the Mumfrey County Commission, the Mumfrey International Bank and Trust Company and many other fine Mumfrey establishments.

Beat reporter? Yes, beat tired, beat down and only within weeks. Amazing isn't it? But they're experts. They're very good at it. Have been at it for years. Beating down young reporters. General reporter, county reporter. Reporter.

On the plus side: He's had a few dates. With the spokeswoman at the Mumfrey International Museum, Roberta Congreve. With Jane Vermillion, Staff Living Reporter. Romantic emails had been exchanged with Jane: "Write your name across the sky. Anything you have to try." Date planned and carried out. Except the (date) had gone backwards. Begun with an interesting fumble on her bed which ended quickly. Perhaps she had a heightened sensitivity to failure, being a living reporter. Though in D.D.'s case, perhaps breathing was the only pre-requisite.

Anyway, she had backed away. Realized it was not a good idea. And this was before they had even had anything to eat. The rest was pointless post-preliminary: Food, a trip to an amusement park: Not unlike his career in journalism. Afterwards, he drove around Mumfrey College's strip of restaurants and bookstores looking for someone to hurt.

After the date, it was harder to get up everyday. Now he had Jane to avoid as well. He found himself constantly wondering what she was doing. He wondered what it would be like to have a camera turned on her as she sat at her desk that only he could see. He grew nostalgic for the relationship they had never had.

How To Entertain A Thought. What To Wear. What To Serve.

By Jane Vermillion, Formerly Eligible Girlfriend

If D.D. weren't such a dick, I'd date him.

So now. Head up again. He told himself he was looking for a way to explain what he was doing. Trying to make it all make sense. A thing didn't make sense if you just said it made sense. It didn't work that way. He felt as if what he was doing was coming again and again to the beginning of things. But why? How? When? Where? What? Who (or whom?) — well, that we know already. As usual, he'd buried the lede (same as lead, though we're not dealing with lead anymore, now computers).

When: Just out of college, last spring. Where: Down I-95. How: By car, a tiny car nicknamed "baby." Why: (You do keep wanting to get into that.) The pen calls, beckons. But why not use the pen you have instead of borrowing someone else's? Just write. Why travel? Too formless; too uninformed. Writing in a firm — writing in an office. With a phone. Maybe really in the end, not writing at all. Not yet.

So, but, okay, if he did this thing what would it have to begin with? The girl was the nut graf. The thing that mattered. The job was the lede. But the truth was that to have a girl in the place, to lead with the job, you had to care about the place itself and he didn't. His heart was elsewhere. His eyes longed for a different landscape. Women could see this in his eyes. Always the failure

thing. Editors could. They knew it right away. He should wear dark glasses.

So, lives here. Still: may long for that, but lives here, in an empty railroad style apartment. With an exquisitely independent cat. Is in love constantly and never. Is.

Try To Get Fired

By D.D. Smith, Staff Writer (until further notice)

If you can't do well, try doing badly enough to get noticed. He was hanging on and he knew it. He wanted, more than anything else, to let go, drop out, fall back down. Circumstances were perversely refusing to allow him to complete his failure.

But why D.D.? Why not try? What's stopping you?

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It Doesn't Matter

By Dread Delightful Smith, Staff Writer

A Mumfrey Recorder Staff Writer was found immortalized this afternoon, in a bar. Discovering one day that his life involved nothing more than the daily recapitulation of the lives of others, under the scrutiny of a man whom he would not trust encountered in a dark alley, he decided, against the advice of counsel, to pursue beatification. "When the going gets tough, the tough become saints," he said.

Step 1, in beatification, it seems, is drinking.

Step 2, in beatification, it seems is also drinking.

Steps 3-6, you guessed it, also drinking, with a cigarette or two.

For: while he was clearly seeking existential justification, he was required to do some work: specifically cover the county beat (see aforementioned): Commission, commissioners, Sheriff, 12 towns.

"Reporting for the Mumfrey Despatch is serious business," the editor intoned, as D.D. was hired. He was reviewing D.D.'s college clips, holding them with thumb and forefinger as if they were pieces of wet toilet paper. For some reason, D.D. thought he'd said — but he would not have said — "Reporting for the Monkey Dispatch."

The editor continued, now nearly mumbling. "Desk over there," he said, without gesture. He was thin, so thin. Pale. Unhappy Gesturing would have been too much work. "Commission meetings — good idea to go — sheriff, check in introduce yourself, assuming, for no good reason, you know what you're doing...."

And that was it? Not quite. He started up again, like a skipping record. An old Victrola.

"Of course, you have your 5 Ws, get things right, in on time. Think you can do that?"

He looked fixedly at D.D., pinched eyes like electric sockets. His assessment was clearly negative. But he hired D.D. anyway, which D.D. took to be a sign.

Now D.D. stood up. He needed air. The newsroom, his little cubicle, was too tightly restricted. He did not want to be restricted. To take a breath, to stop, to look at everyone working around him was to instantly feel pressure. The pressure of falling behind. Everyone else would get their stories in on time, but not him, not D.D. No one looked up. No one was remotely aware of who he was, let alone what he was doing. No one cared. He walked down the hall and into the bathroom. He looked in the mirror and inspected his face. It was a weak face. The eyes drooped on either side of his nose, the eyebrows were thick and black and the chin disappeared into his neck. There were people — women, men — whose faces could carry them into middle age. D.D.'s face was not going to carry him anywhere.

His brain too, that was the real problem. Frazzled. Every time he sat down to the keyboard, he felt compelled to write a paragraph that had nothing to do with the story at hand. Deadline was only a

few hours away, but his fingers would not go where he wanted them to. Or, more exactly, where the editor wanted them to. It was not that D.D. objected, really, to the story's content. It was just that he felt compelled to tell his own story first. For one thing, this meant his stories took twice as long to complete.

"Once upon a time in Lowell House."

"Dateline: LOWELL HOUSE."

"Just six inches, no more," his editor said. D.D. laughed inappropriately. There was a bad joke about a man trying to convince a woman that six inches was less than it actually was — spreading his thumb and forefinger to a length that was more like three.

His editor was right. He was constitutionally unable to do what he had been hired to do. He was like the non-working cog on the assembly line. The assignment came to him, he reported it, and then the line stopped. They wanted him to write like them, think like them. Write the same thing, every time. Just write.

He wanted to. It wasn't that he didn't want to. He wanted to succeed. Even just get the story out and go home. But something inside him was stopping him. He couldn't explain it. He wanted to get his resume out. He wanted something to eat. His editor was preoccupied. He decided to go get lunch.

He left the office and walked across the street. He imagined a large hamburger. A Coke. The hamburger and the Coke would give him the energy, the focus. Would he have it with all of the fixings or just some? He wanted the tangy taste of the pickle.

Six Inches

By Quacky the Duck, Cartoon Reporter.

TOONTOWN — The Toontown Board of Offenders voted Friday to tell the assorted citizenry that Chivalry is dead. And, Frankly, Anne, Frankly, that they killed it. Not one single female member of the board was treated with respect, nor did any one of the commissioners get up, to let the female members sit down. They remarked, prophylactically, that there were no female —

The hamburger. The hamburger. Focus on the hamburger. On the college strip, People were cheerful. They still beamed with the sense of possibility. He chose "Mistral's." Went in and sat down in a booth.

The waitress came over. "The hamburger?"

He smiled. "The hamburger."

She looked at him with a look as if to say was there really any sense in him doing this chatting thing? "It's not that complicated," she said. She looked at him again and went off to the kitchen.

If he stayed here all afternoon, he wouldn't have to write the story. It could be that he simply wasn't meant to write it. The sun bathed the front of the restaurant which was close to empty. Students would likely not be here until later. Perhaps they'd been and gone off to their lives. Oh the implacable permanence of it all. Pots and pans clanked somewhere. He could hear the hamburger sizzling. He looked at the menu. There were salads, chicken sandwiches, special omelettes.

College Dive Better Than Expected

By Do Dine, Food Writer

When in the city of Redmond, be sure to sample the fair fixins at Mistral's, the local luncheonaria. All manner of optionals are served, but this correspondent was particularly charmed by the

"One hamburger." He looked up. For one thing, she was blonde. For another, she was short. He didn't particularly care for either one. "Did you want something with that?" The slightest of smiles played about her lips.

"Coke?"

"You're pretty predictable. Pretty regular," she said.

"Pretty fucked up," he said.

She sprayed the soda out of the fountain in front of her into a glass without taking her eyes off of him. "I wouldn't know," she said. "Not sure I'd want to."

She placed the glass in front of him. It made a light thud on the counter. She started to walk off, but then she turned and considered

him again. "It's a little early to be having lunch, isn't it?"

He looked guiltily up at the clock. He had a feeling this had happened. It was 10:45.

"What's the matter? Don't like your job? Homesick?" She waited, almost impatiently for an answer, then not getting one, turned and walked back to the kitchen.

He watched her go. He liked the way she was built. But to an even greater extent, he liked the way she was put together.

"Sex," she said, when she returned. "Is meant to improve on masturbation."

"What do you mean?" he said, reddening.

"I saw the way you watched me. It wasn't hard to see it. I could have slapped you, I probably should have. But I can tell I wouldn't be the first one today. The scars are a little obvious."

He stared into his plate. The burger was half-finished, but it was a thing to behold. He had always liked burgers. But he was liking this one particularly well.

"I'll tell you what. Suppose I do you a favor you definitely don't deserve."

"I would be more than — "

"Shut up and don't ruin it. I change my mind and you're screwed. Or, I change my mind and you're definitely not. I'm not making any promises."

He shut up so as not to ruin it.

"You pick me up here around 8. Now go do what you have to do and pick me up here around that time."

He stared at her. He did not ordinarily put stock in fairy godmothers, but this time he thought there might be something to it. He looked at the burger and then reached into his pocket. "Go on now, get," she said.

He got.

I DON'T CARE. I DON'T CARE.

I don't care. It has nothing to do with me. Just the facts ma'am. Just the facts.

I was there, but it didn't really matter. This happened. That happened. This happened and then that happened. But the significance? Escapes me.

Truly, honestly? Boring. Okay, something about a meeting. They were meeting for some reason or another. The county commission or the school board or was it the mayor and his council? I can't remember. Who cares anyway? Not me.

One person attended the meeting. That was me, Dandy Don Smith, reporter. I sat there all the way through it. Didn't leave to go to the bathroom or anything. By the end, I had taken lots of notes and had run up to the front of the room to get a quote from the county commissioner, or was it the mayor?

One day, this could be the beginning of something big for me, I intend to be famous. But right now, this will do. I'm on my way to New York City or somewhere. Perhaps I'll read the news on television. Wear a nice suit. Not now.

Now, Disinterested, inDifferent Smith, your reporter, is your only link between the doings of your county whatever it is and how it affects you. Unless of course you don't read my story in which case there is no link at all. Your county commission is important, really. But the chance that they will do something truly important, truly significant is not great. Which is why there is such a high premium on my not falling asleep. So far, I have not fallen asleep, which is really kind of a good thing, don't you think?

Dull Disintegrating Smith was still awake by the end of the meeting so that he could run to the front, to try to get a comment, something to liven up the lead, "We felt it was really rather a productive meeting," something like that, so that he could prove, if anyone cared, that he had actually been there.

Shit. What was separating him from being fired was so paper-thin, so membrane-like, he felt as if it was almost his duty, his destiny, to pop it.

The newsroom was quiet. He sat at his computer. Tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap. Just write something. Anything.

The Mumfrey County Commission today voted to — what? Not much really.

Once More With Feeling

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By Deliver on Deadline, Reporter

The Mumfrey County Commission today met and deliberated. Hail fellow well met and deliberated. They voted nine to five to authorize funds for the new hospital. Although there was some debate (at least in the minds of this reporter) as to whether or not every member of the Council actually knew what the vote was about.

The hospital will be built (whether the citizens like it or not) on the grounds of the former High School (also built with no real concern about the feelings of you, or me). It will include a special brain surgery wing (some of the members of the council could be its first patients).

"Look, this is not my fault," said the county executive, Mike Fuller.

By 8 p.m.

Mumfrey will have a new hospital next year, following a nine to five vote Thursday night by the County Commission to authorize the funds.

The 280-bed hospital is slated to include a neurosurgery wing that officials hope will attract prominent specialists to the Mumfrey area.

"We have done our part to put Mumfrey on the medical map," said Commission Chairman, John Doe, 41. "You wouldn't have to be a brain surgeon to be interested in working at this hospital, but it also wouldn't hurt."

The commission voted quickly on the proposal, which had been under debate for several months. Although public comment had been solicited, little was offered. Contracts will be put out for bid by the end of the year.

Critics of the hospital have said in the past it is too far from main thoroughfares to attract neurosurgery patients or neurosurgeons

who would rather locate in prominent teaching areas near big cities.

In other business, funds were voted for additional teachers for Redmond's elementary school and for an additional squad car for the county sheriff's department.

"Was it really worth all that?" the editor asked, not a trace of humor in his tired voice. "If I ask you to produce a story for me, I can't be waiting all day for it. Not for something like this."

He did not look at D. His fingers clicked his keyboard automatically, scrolling through the story, making quick, obvious changes. He kept clicking. Then with the mildest of finger lifts, pressed send. He turned away from D to his desk and began shuffling some papers.

D. looked at the clock. It was 7:45. He decided he had received the signal to leave. He backed slowly away from the desk. The editor did not respond. D. put on his coat and backed slowly to the door. 7:50.

He pulled into a parking place outside Mistral's at 7:59. At the exact stroke of the hour, she appeared at the door. He waved. She walked to the car, got in, and slammed the door. He got in.

"At least you're punctual."

He started the car.

She looked at him as if starting the car were an impertinence. "Live far?"

"Not too far."

"Then go."

His apartment was upstairs back right. He had a view of nothing in particular, a field, some houses, a tree out his bathroom window. He had a cat named Joe.

"Nice cat," she said.

"Likes to sleep on my neck, almost choked me once."

"Like your job?"

"How do you know about my job?"

"Like it's not written on your face. "Can't do your job." Right there across the bridge of your nose."

"Of course I can."

She sat on the counter and swung her legs. "Of course you can't. Can't. What if I told you, I could lead you through a door in the air and take you back home. What if? You'd go in a minute, so what's keeping you here? You're like a fish out of water. A nothing in nowhere."

He considered this. Perhaps it was possible. He wondered how it would feel. To be transported like that. "I'm a journalist," he said. But the sound was hollow. You wanted to say those words and mean them. Deluded Dork, Staff Writer.

"I don't see you as the foreign correspondent type. And here, for you, is foreign. You're walking around like a guy in a fog."

He thought of his story on the commission meeting. John Doe. The phone rang. It was the copy desk.

"Dipsey, that you?"

"Whatever."

"You check whether John Doe is really that guy's name?"

He looked at his companion. He should have checked. He really should have. What, were these people in conspiracy against him? What committee chairman would give a local reporter the wrong name? He had assumed —

"Don't assume. This one's on me, Dipsey, or whatever your first name is. It's Smithson, Martin. Martin Smithson. You could have found that out if you'd read the clip file. Names aren't a big deal for you, obviously. If I had a name like yours, I'd ignore them too. Have a nice night, Dipsey."

He put down the phone.

She smiled at him. "What did I tell you?" I don't want to rub it in. I really don't. But there it is."

D.D. went into the bathroom and looked out the window. Could he keep this up? He leaned against the side of the bathtub. The cat came and sat on the edge of the tub and looked out with him.

"Hemingway," he said, unconvincingly. "Hemingway was a reporter."

"Que sera, sera buddy," the Waitress said. She was standing right behind him. She put her arms around him. He felt like crying. "Que sera, doesn't always sera."

The next morning, he stood, refreshed, cheerful, at the edge of the newsroom. His suit was bright, so were his prospects. The editor had not looked at him since he was hired and did not intend to start now. Who cared?

"Hey," the editor said. Nor, apparently, did he intend to start referring to him by name. "State beat. Down a reporter today. New exhibit at the museum. Snake." He looked up and realized to whom he was speaking, then looked away quickly. "No foolishness."

D.D. scanned the press release. A snake. Rocky the Bolivian Boa visiting the Mumfrey International Museum. Rocky's visit would reverberate, ratify. Stayed at a hotel? Now it must be an international hotel; landed at the airport, then it must be international, just like the title says. Who cared whether any planes came in from other countries. Atlanta was another country, sort of. Maybe D.C.?

OXYMORON, North —

Stop. He told himself. "Okay Chief," he said.

"On deadline," the editor mumbled into his desk. "Before deadline, even."

"Sure."

At noon, D.D. stood in the center of the exhibit room, face to face with Rocky (separated by a glass panel). The snake was enclosed in a glass case. D.D. was the only reporter there.

Apparently the prospect of an audience of the Mumfrey International Press Corps had not energized Rocky. If not, what could? Clearly the first question to ask was, "Is Rock extant?"

"What?!" said Museum Spokesperson, Roberta Congreve (or so claimed her nametag), known to D.D. privately, previously, as Berta ("Call me Berta, not Bertha though"). "No, he is not dead. You're

kidding right? This is reporter humor. Okay, you got me." She chuckled. "I would say that Rocky's kind of like one of those rock stars who do multi-city tours. He's a little wiped at the moment. I think this afternoon he should perk right up, especially after feeding time."

"What's he eat?"

"Live mice."

"So some time today — "

"Yes, some time today, we're going to feed him. In fact that time is right now. Perhaps you would like to watch? The snake?"

D.D. grimaced. "Sure, there's nothing I would like better."

A man wearing a white coat with the nametag "Snake Handler, Amos Burr" silently rolled in a cart. On the cart was a small clear plastic cage. A modern tumbrel. Internationalism itself. Inside was a mouse, clearly unaware of his imminent, grizzly fate. The mouse sniffed the air tentatively.

Amos smiled at Roberta.

"Ready Amos?" she said, with too good humor.

Amos nodded. He picked up the mouse — D.D. was glad the mouse did not have a nametag (Mouse, Squeak?) — and lowered him gently into Rock's cage behind him. Rock's head moved slightly, perceiving the mouse, but not taking an interest. The tongue flickered. Then, he continued to lie, facing forward. Clearly Rock knew where his afternoon snack was and was not concerned about the logistics of its ingestion. The mouse sniffed the air then deposited a small dropping.

"How long does this go on?" D.D. asked Roberta.

"Sometimes for several hours," she said.

D.D. took out his notepad and a pen and shifted the press release and the folder on the museum he had been given into his left hand. Then he propped the notepad against the side of the cage.

"Don't do that!"

"What?"

"Don't touch the cage. It disturbs him."

D.D. pulled back. Reflexively, he wrote down, "Eating takes several hours. Don't touch the cage. Snake Handler, Amos Burr, Museum Spokeswoman, Roberta Congreve." He checked the nametags to make sure the names were spelled right. Roberta was a *spokesperson*. He wrote down, "Berta (Roberta) is not spokeswoman, spokesperson." Rocky still had not moved.

"Sometimes the snake will be sedentary," Roberta said, briskly, after a brief moment of silence. "You know sedentary."

"Will be sedentary?" D.D. asked. "How do you know?"

Roberta grimaced. "What do you mean how do I know? It is my job to know. In case you ask. I'm good at my job."

Discreetly, in the vicinity of the snake's tail, the mouse capered. Perhaps it was under the impression that it had been given a new, large, well-heated cage with a not unappealing snakeskin couch.

A half hour passed. "Well you're welcome to stay longer," Roberta said. "You know once he gets it in his mouth, it takes a while to go down. You could be here a while." Roberta looked at him with what appeared to be pity in her eyes. "By the way, D.D., did you get a photographer?"

She was good at her job and he wasn't. He had liked that about her and more besides. He had hoped she too might be the one, the direction, the reason for staying. She had been, it turned out, too into speaking. In the act, in flagrante, she had called out, "We're making love!" as if the idea, the reality of it, had just dawned on her. Or as if she had somehow not been involved at the planning stages.

It was not coincidental that now that D.D.'s career was on the downswing, she was distancing.

"Coming later," he said. "Thanks for reminding me though."

She looked at him, then backing towards the entrance, said, "Don't stay too long and don't touch, okay?"

Typically, he was sorely tempted. Once upon a time he had known how to act. Somewhere, somehow, he had come to the

conclusion that he was on the appropriate career path. He stared at Rocky, who had not, even now, begun to consider the possibility of ingesting the mouse. What kind of story was this?

Snake Arrives, Declines To Eat Lunch: Hunger Strike?

The mouse, lulled by the warmth of the cage, had gone to sleep.

D.D. needed, wanted, desired with all of his being to tap the side of the cage with his pen. There was no one in the exhibit room. Apparently he was the only reporter who had heeded the museum's call. Of course, there could be a security camera somewhere. Roberta would be watching, perched, in waiting, expecting him to transgress, knowing him well, in league now with his editor, possibly out there too. Perhaps, all he needed to do was touch the side of the cage and he could be gloriously, happily released from his suffering.

Snake Arrives, Declines To Eat Lunch: Hunger Strike?

By D.D. Smith, Staff Writer

Rocky was in no particular hurry. He had all day. His dinner was not going anywhere. And in fact, looking out from his particular position in the middle of a glass cage in the center of the exhibition room at the Mumfrey International Museum, there was no particular cause for movement. The room was devoid of admirers, handlers, starlets; he was alone.

Behind him was lunch: a mouse, who, not perceiving Rocky, had settled down to doze. Above the mouse, a reporter peered. Would Rocky move? In the interests of journalism, in your interest, dear reader, the reporter considered breaking the snake handling taboo. If he tapped the cage, mightn't that speed Rocky's reaction, allowing him to bring the story in on time for his readers to read it? And yet, journalists must resist, at all costs, creating news, becoming the story.

So, even as he reached his writing instrument out, in the air, ahead of him, in the direction of the cage; his pen becoming unmoved, at that moment, by the snake's discomfort, not to mention the warnings of the museum staff, he wondered, he pondered, whether in fact he was doing the right thing. He hesitated no longer.

Perhaps he should have. Dear Reader, I assure you, you are the best judge.

His pen rapped briefly on the side of the cage, producing no discernible response from Rocky. However, as if the cage were wired with an electronic device, as if he were under the observation of hidden cameras, no sooner did his pen clack resoundingly against the glass then there appeared in the room, Museum Spokesperson, Roberta (Berta) Congreve and Snake Handler, Amos Burr.

"Didn't you read the sign," Miss Congreve —

"I can't run this," the editor said. It was mid-afternoon. To save on lighting, to add drama, the newsroom was dark. The editor picked up D.D.'s story and impaled it on a small silver spike on his desk. D.D. was dismissed.

And so what now?

"Take a trip," said the Waitress, whose name, she announced, peremptorily, was Kim.

Kim appeared outside his house the next morning, in a small car, which turned out to include a cat carrier.

They were going South. He wondered that it was possible to go further South given their current location, but indeed it was.

"This is not going well for you," she said, when they were outside the county line.

"This is not a state secret."

"Not the job, the date."

"The date?"

"Yes, the date. This is a date. What did you think, I came to get you to solve your career problems? I can't solve those career problems. If I could, I'd be in a different line of work."

D.D. smiled. "Why am I so lucky?"

"Who said anything about luck?"

"Certainly not you."

"You have no luck. You are down on your luck. You are luckless."

"Now who's screwing up the date?"

They were driving through a long, wheat field towards the ocean. He thought that the world before him was remarkably beautiful, as, in fact, was his companion. He could think of nothing else to call this other than luck.

"So, how did you get here, Cowboy? I mean, I'm guessing I know how you got here. In a car and all. But why set out for the fair town of Redmond, Mumfrey County?"

He tried to imagine. Something about how it was a path from somewhere to somewhere else. There had been a clear reason once.

Somebody had said something about how being a journalist — he realized he couldn't remember what. "It was a mistake," he said, half-heartedly.

He could imagine. He had imagined. Telling stories. Himself in Hemingway's hat. A Cat in the Rain. Once upon a time, he, himself, sitting in a square in Paris, reading Hemingway's dispatches. Mumfrey Despatches? Monkey See? He owned, after all, a trenchcoat. This, all of this, was embarrassing. Mumfrey was the opposite of Paris. There was no romance here.

"Nothing's a mistake."

This was. One thing confused for another. Sidestepping. Inability to recognize his own inclinations. Leaning against his own lean.

"Well, I came for the newspaper."

"That rag?"

"Supposed to be a good paper."

"According to whom?"

"Newspaper writers."

"You came all the way here because this paper is supposed to be a good paper? According to newspaper writers? What kind of dumb shit Yankee nonsense is that?" She smiled at him across the car seat. "Look, I like you. I think you're cute. I'm going to help you out. Whether I sleep with you or not is still an open question."

"What can I do to close it?"

"Mostly keep your mouth shut." She smiled again. "So keep telling me your life story. Or maybe I can do it for you? You're coming down here to teach us fools how to act, right? That's what

you people up there think, don't you. That we're all a bunch of idiots you can teach a thing or two."

He didn't deny it. "Everybody makes mistakes," he said.

"So how come you didn't try and teach some of your own people how to act? Huh? Got to come down here and civilize us?" She was quiet for a while. "It's not really your fault, you Yankee imperialist. But I can tell there's something about you that makes you not really cut out for this. And it's that that's making me want to help you."

Hours later, they lay fully dressed on a bed in a room in a small coastal inn.

"A cocktail?" she asked, quietly. "I think, a cocktail." The phone rang. She picked it up. "For you."

It was the editor.

"How did you —"

"Look, D.D., we're really at the end of our rope with you, you might want to reconsider coming back to work."

D.D. thought these were the truest words ever spoken. He felt strangely honored. The editor had not expended so many words in conversation with him before.

"We'll give you some severance. Help with your moving expenses. You're probably going to have to head back north, right?"

"Who says you're—" She was listening in on the extension.

"Shhhh!"

The Editor was silent.

Dapper Don Smith, executed, fired, removed from his occupation. Dilemma: Does he decamp? He dropped the phone. Delighted, really, he rolled over.

"There," she said. She smiled at him.

"There?"

"You never really wanted that job anyway, I saved you from it."

"What do you mean you saved me from it?"

"Look, sometimes people just wash up places, you know? End up places they're not supposed to be and can't or won't get out. I could tell that was you within a very short time of meeting you. You just had that look."

"What look?"

"Delusional, disillusioned, detoured — I couldn't put my finger on it."

"So what do I do now?"

"Stay here, at least for a week, then we'll see."

"How do you know?"

"Something is coming. Or if it isn't, you'll know that by then."

"What do you mean?"

"I think it works like this: there are periods of time when people are like targets. When they're kind of likely or at least open to being hit — "

"What if I don't want to be hit?"

"Well, you won't be. But I'm here to make you want to be hit. To get you ready."

"Sounds frightening."

"No, it's great and there's sex involved."

* * *

In the daylight, she looked beautiful. Standing stark naked in the middle of the room, a small expanse of hillside outside the Inn's picture window. Outside, nobody came and went.

In the daylight, she looked beautiful, except they never got to the daylight, because, because, because. She refused to open the curtains. "Listen, I've got a reputation to maintain."

"As what?" he wondered.

Released, finally, he remembered her standing, stark naked in the middle of the room. This sight was like a light in his mind that flickered on and off, reminding him, a warning light. A pilot light?

He was like a stone trying to remember why it had been cast in a particular direction.

There would be a day when she would send him a postcard which he would read, standing at a street corner in the middle of Manhattan and wonder if he had ever been there, if it had been a dream. It would show a picture of a statue of the David, and on the back it would say, uncharacteristically, "Thinking of You."

He would have driven out of there. It was a great distance and his was only a small car. He would have returned, back up I-95, like Ulysses Grant, except in retreat.

And on that street corner, he would feel, a very brief twinge of regret, for that moment of in between, the part where he was neither here nor there. The discovery, in the middle of a hotel room, that he had been lifted back up onto the wave of life and cast back onto the open sea.

