

Who Will Carry Us?

by Peter Landau

1.

People avoided Mac, the Great White Hunter, which was how he liked to think of himself, even though he was not white. Mac was cocoa colored and stalked his prey nearly nude.

The city was his wild, the great hunting ground for shopping carts. Shopping carts, like cats or crocodiles that swim in sewers, thrived in urban centers, especially shopping centers like big-box stores and, where Mac was presently, the supermarket.

What's so super about the supermarket? Nothing. It was the opposite of super, which he knew was not stupor, but liked the sound of that word and so used it. "Stupor-market," Mac said to no one in particular. He kept saying it—Mac's eureka!—until he was asked to leave.

Outside, a stock boy wrangling shopping carts pushed an obedient dozen like a prosthetic tongue mocking Mac. He closed one eye and aimed his index finger. "Bang!" Mac said, picking them off in his mind.

What's the fun in hunting carts in captivity? A true sportsman will track his prey for weeks to get a clean kill. Yet even the wild ones settled near the stupor-markets, attracted by the gravity of familiarity.

Mac retrieved a twisted metal scrap from the sewer grate. All of his senses melded with the discarded object. It was a boot-lock, the shackle of the shopping carts. "I've got you!" he shrieked. This one had broken its master's chains and made a run for it, recently, too. The metal was still hot.

Mac crawled, tracking the errant cart's trail, his face inches from the concrete. He smeared dirt over his forehead, down his cheeks and dabbed it on his chin. Engulfed by the scent of the cart, he didn't see the truck. He heard the rumble of its engine first, followed by laughter and the earth-shaking weight of the vehicle careening over the pot-marked road. The wheels narrowly missed

him. It took the corner at dangerous speed. In the truck bed jostled a haul of shopping carts.

Philbin J. Jackleg III came from a long line of junk collectors. His truck had been handed down through the generations, held together with duct tape and wire hangers he found outside a dry cleaner one night. It ate oil and diesel, spewing noxious fumes that made Philbin sick as a child but now awakened a dreamy nostalgia behind the wheel. His reverie was interrupted by a fanfare of car horns as he raced through a red light. He laughed at the angry motorists.

The shopping cart was only a block away, grazing unaware. He shifted to neutral and coasted. The only sound coming from the truck was the shopping carts struggling in their restraints. They were nervous.

The truck was losing speed. Philbin reached over the passenger seat to roll down the window. His underarm smelled of cold cuts. He slid across the bench seat, keeping one hand on the wheel as the other took hold of a coarse rope. Leaning out from the window he spun the lasso in the air. The noose dropped over the shopping cart and quickly tightened.

Philbin leaped out and tackled the cart. They rolled into a grassy yard as the truck came to a creaking stop, jumping the curb and biting the grass with its front tires.

"What's going on here?"

Philbin looked up and saw a woman. He ignored her question, cleaning out the remnants of the cart's regurgitated contents—moldy old cans and dirty blankets and newspapers—disgorged on the lawn.

"Good day, ma'am." Philbin lifted his hand to tip his hat politely, but he wasn't wearing a hat and shook a greasy strand of hair instead.

"My cans! My bed! My cart!" a bum cried from the alleyway. He wore a ski cap and a heavy winter coat. A scraggly beard covered most of his face, which was indistinguishable in color and texture from the bristly facial hair.

Philbin had seen them all: punk kids go-carting carts, idle day laborers sitting on overturned carts and bums warming themselves around immolated carts. But none were worse than those that housed their pitiful possessions in stolen carts and traveled the back streets like Bedouin.

The woman wanted to know who was to going clean up this mess. Philbin ignored her. He faced the bum and raised one palm as symbolic balm, but Philbin's other hand remained on his game.

"Buddy, this isn't your cart," Philbin said. "I'm taking it back to its rightful owner."

The bum was a dull pole at the center of his scattered belongings. They hardly ever put up a fight, merely slink back to the streets. Philbin would see him again, this cart thief, for once they got a taste for shopping carts nothing could sate it.

The bum taken care of, Philbin turned and faced the woman standing between him and his cart. "Ma'am," he said again, less certain how to deal with this civilian.

"I'm going to call the police," she said.

Philbin circumvented her as she spoke, bending over the fallen cart and carefully unraveling the rope from its wheels. He checked for damage. It was unhurt.

"Go on, boy, get up," Philbin said, ignoring the woman's senseless monologue.

The cart was on all fours again and Philbin pushed it to the truck, which stuck from the street at an odd angle.

"That's a good boy," Philbin said, helping the shopping cart into the back of the truck. "We're taking you home."

Philbin secured the cart. It rattled curiously besides the others. They'll be best of friends before I get behind the wheel, he thought.

"Are you listening to me?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not," Philbin said, wrapping a hand around the truck's door handle. "I don't much like to be threatened."

I'm just doing my job. The police got better things to occupy them. And I'd say you do, too."

The bum was on the lawn rocking on his shanks, the eye of a garbage storm, mourning his lost cart. A black cloud shot from the back of Philbin's truck and he was gone, leaving the bum to grieve and the woman coughing on his exhaust.

Beatrice Towner was trapped. A crazed street person blocked her escape. And now a nearly naked man had joined him. He was sniffing the garbage littering her lawn.

"Safeway," the nearly naked man stated.

"Yes," the street person answered. "The best carts, so large, and they last forever."

"They're fiercely independent. Put up quite a fight. How'd you bring this one down?"

The street person didn't say anything. He was looking at Beatrice. "Watch out!" he shouted. "I sleep on that."

Beatrice jumped off the dirty blanket and used this diversion to run into the house, slamming the door behind her. The curtain in the front window moved slightly to reveal her prying eye. Her ear was pressed against the phone receiver.

"I'm calling the police," she shouted from inside her house, but neither man appeared to hear her.

The street person held an armful of trash and stared across the street at an orange cart. It was empty and apparently unattended in front of another house, docile as a pet.

The nearly naked man crawled on his belly over the black tar. Cars sped by unaware of the human speedbump until they were right on top of him, at which point they blared their horns and swerved wildly to avoid hitting him.

He was so low to the ground that if he stuck out his tongue he would taste the road. The cart was ignorant of his approach. A plastic baggie that once may have held fruit or vegetables was stuck to the carriage and fluttered lightly in the breeze.

Leaping from his prone position, the nearly naked man was suddenly running. Beatrice was struck by his athleticism. Limbs strode gracefully, long arms spreading like a net.

The shopping cart had no time to react, not even a wheel squeaked before the nearly naked man was on it. He was airborne, a blur of brown, landing with a crash inside the nest where children sit as parents shop.

When the dust settled, and it literally did, as there had been no rain for several weeks leaving the ground dry and brittle, the nearly naked man was smiling. He crossed the street, this time on his bare feet, the cart obediently following at his side, tamed.

The nearly naked man slapped the cart with his sinewy arm and it shook in agreement. The two strange men gathered up the trash from Beatrice's lawn and rolled the newfound cart noisily down the street.

Beatrice watched from her window, waiting until they were no longer in sight. She hesitantly unlocked the door and cracked it open enough for to peak her head out. Satisfied she was alone, Beatrice turned on the sprinklers and felt the mist against her cheeks. She let the water run until the grass was saturated.

"Who are you?"

"Me?" Mac wiped the sweat from his face. "Just a man."

"Thank you, Man."

"This cart should suit your purposes...what's your name?"

He couldn't remember his name. He had been living on the streets for so many years that he answered only to bum.

"Bob," he realized. "Yes, it's what I call my blog: Bob the Bum. Have you read it?"

"No."

Yeah, I don't have a computer either. I use the library. You can look up porn, but what's the point if you can't...you know, in the library."

Mac didn't know.

"I used to keep a verbal blog, just rambling on the street. I'd talk, talk, talk, but there was no record of it. People don't appreciate the oral tradition anymore."

They had walked up to the steps of the local library. Bob invited Mac inside to read his latest entry. He planned to write up today's adventure with Man.

"Mac," Mac said.

"Macman."

Mac didn't correct him. He wasn't listening anymore. He was looking for more shopping carts.

Don't look to the sky. There is no bird, no plane. The superman you seek is earthbound, able to leap tall shopping carts in a single bound, faster than a speeding collection truck.

Our knight in shining armor has arrived, but he wears no armor, not even shoes. He is Macman!

These are Dark Times. We without walls are subject to vile mercenaries out to strip us of our possessions and even our liberty. Evil comes in the form of a shopping cart collection agency, a junkman, a piece of human scum.

But who says the shopping cart is property? Who makes it a beast of their burden? You! Shopping carts are tagged and corralled to do your bidding, to carry your goods, your produce and meat and milk.

We invisibles, the homeless, the bum, hobo, human flotsam and jetsam, the trash that you ignore on your commute from one useless endeavor to the next, we are not blind to this slavery in the so-called Land of the Free.

The face of evil is not banal, it is ugly and smelly and foul-mouthed. It rides a chariot that wags a demon's tail of black smoke. But evil cannot exist without the balance of good. Today I met evil's counterweight. Macman. He was strong and tall and proud and naked, rejecting the products of slavery for the sovereignty of his sweet-chocolate flesh.

Macman has come to me, but he carried a message for you. Release your shopping carts, break free of the abusive cycle and pass on the good word to others. Yes, you will be ridiculed, persecuted and maybe even killed for your beliefs, but if your sacrifice frees one cart then it has been worth it. Macman will not rest until all carts are freed from bondage. Revolution burns across the land. Will you be guided by the light or consumed in its flames?

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Philbin J. Jackleg III never turned off the engine of his truck. It sputtered besides the loading dock where Philbin stood with the manager of the Safeway. He watched the fat man suck a toothpick, his face a grotesque appetizer. The meal was in the manager's hand, a check that he swept back and forth. Philbin knew that meant the manager was agitated.

"We have surveillance cameras set up around the perimeter of the parking lot," the manager said. He looked down at the row of carts Philbin had just taken off his truck. He walked around them, inspecting the shopping carts for damage. "If you're taking these at night and selling them back to me at a profit, I'll know. It'll be on tape. Don't think I won't prosecute."

Philbin held his rage, but the truck backfired angrily. Thick diesel fumes left an unpleasant odor.

The Safeway manager handed the check to Philbin and mumbled something before turning his back on the cart collector and returning to the supermarket. The air curtain gusted to keep the insects out.

There was a man standing at the cart collection station talking to his hand. "Bah," Philbin said, dismissing the craziness of the Safeway. He was happy to climb into his truck and leave the lot.

Philbin peered through the dirty window and kept an eye out for shopping carts as he drove aimlessly throughout the city. He took sharp turns on a whim, watching the froth of bric-a-brac wash over his dashboard.

The truck was his office, watering hole and bathroom. He kept a jar with his urine on the floor, pouring it out in the gutter when the smell got too intense. There were newspapers and magazines he found on his journeys spread over the passenger seat as well as torn open wrappers from candy bars and savory snacks.

Philbin circled the local groceries and big-box stores in larger arcs, the radio blaring, but he only saw penned carts. On days like these Philbin would often take a break, sleep in a movie theater until nighttime when the carts, nocturnal by nature, emerged from the shadows cast by the setting sun.

His mind pondered the mysterious ways of the shopping cart when he saw one, in the distance, just the glint of sun on steel, but unmistakable. Philbin clicked off the radio and moved towards the glimmering hope.

The cart traveled with a bum. But this bum was different. He was too clean, and he was holding a weapon in his hand. No. He was talking into it—the nut from the parking lot. Philbin lifted his foot off the gas pedal and silently descended on the unsuspecting couple. He leaped from the truck and landed on the cart. It didn't have much fight in it, and he easily lifted the shopping cart to the empty bed of his truck, which had collided with a signpost bending it to an odd angle.

"That's city property," said the nut. He was taking pictures of Philbin.

The nut was young, with thick hair, cut into something akin to order, though it struggled in unruly clumps. He was clean-shaven and overall clean in appearance. His dark shoes, recently polished, were too stylish for an officer of the law. Philbin tied the cart to his truck. It was his first cart of the day and these things came in waves, so Philbin didn't want to waste time.

"You need to report that," the nut said, taking a picture of Philbin and the truck and the sign tilted like an arrow shot from the sky.

"I don't need to do nothing," Philbin acknowledged the nut from his self-righteous perch in the truck, "except fill my truck with shopping carts."

"Why do you take carts off the street and return them to captivity?" the nut asked, removing the camera from Philbin's face and replacing it with the tape recorder.

"What are you, one of those cart-lovers?" Philbin jumped onto the hard ground, bringing up a small cloud of dust that clung to the dirty cuff of his workpants.

"I'm a reporter for Shopping Cart News. I'm working on a story about the cart power movement. Do you believe that carts have rights?"

"Rights? What about my right to make a living? Turn that off!"

"Nothing is off the record," he said, pushing slipping glasses up the ridge of his nose.

"The record? You're writing about this? I have no time for such foolishness. Papers are a waste of paper. You know where I find newspapers? In the gutter, or stuck to the ass of some bum."

"How do you justify what you're perpetrating on these poor, innocent, defenseless creatures?"

"Perpetrating? Defenseless? I thought you people were supposed to be objective."

"Words have bias. Nothing is objective."

"Well then, go back to your words. I have work to do."

Philbin climbed into the cab of his truck and slammed the door on the nut. Philbin smiled, watching him get smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror.

Gilbert Rivera read the newspaper before he could read. He'd spread it out on the table with his cereal each morning and turned the large, light pages as he ate breakfast, ink coming off on his

fingers marking the bowl. He cut out articles and taped them to the walls of his room, covering bylines with a crude scrawl that was supposed to be his name.

He joined the school newspaper, earning the front page for his exposé on cafeteria workers. They weren't wearing hairnets, as required by law. He applied for journalism school, early admission, and upon graduation was hired by the industry trade, Shopping Cart News.

He told the junkman that he was a reporter, which was not entirely true: he was a copyeditor. A thoroughly challenging position, as neither the editorial staff nor reporters knew how to spell or understood the fundamentals of grammar. Downsizing provided Gilbert with some light research duties, which he zestfully took to despite the lack of compensation.

It was while trolling the Internet for stories that he discovered Bob the Bum. The editor was interested and told Gilbert to see if he could find the blogger. But there was no contact information on the site, no photographs and few personal details, mostly incomprehensible all-cap ranting, until he read the most recent entry.

This was no longer an item for the Cartload O' Laffs column. This was a human rights piece, well, not exactly human rights—object rights? It was news so new that it couldn't be easily pigeonholed. This was Gilbert's Watergate, his Pentagon Papers. There wasn't even a National Association for the Advancement of Shopping Carts (NAASC) yet, but there would be, and Gilbert would be the first to document it.

Gilbert canvassed the neighborhood. It wouldn't be hard to find the junkman again, but the story rested on uncovering the blogger and, more importantly, Macman, the Martin Luther King of shopping carts rights organizers, the great unknown at the center of this mystery.

All afternoon Gilbert knocked on doors and was unceremoniously told to leave. This was what reporters in the South

must have faced in the fifties and sixties. That only firmed his resolve.

Finally, he caught a break. The woman who answered the door even invited Gilbert inside, offered him something to drink. She nodded politely when he asked if he might record what she had to say.

They sat in the small living room with a matching couch and easy chair surrounding a low glass table on which perfect-bound glossy magazines were stacked neatly at the corner. They must pay a dollar a word at such publications, Gilbert thought.

The woman introduced herself as Beatrice Towner and left the room to put a kettle on the fire. Gilbert would have preferred coffee, but he was happy with tea and the opportunity to sit down after being on his feet all day.

Gilbert's moist socks clung to his feet, suffocating in Italian leather. His shoes were ovens cooking unsavory meat. He had to cleanse them each evening with warm soapy water before he could relax. The smell nauseated him. Gilbert wondered if he was in the right body.

Beatrice returned with two steaming mugs on a tray and placed it on the coffee table. Gilbert leaned forward to fill his tea with milk and sugar. Beatrice, he noted, squeezed a lemon into hers. She then held her tea up to puckered lips with both hands, but didn't take a sip.

"Well," Gilbert said, after taking a hot gulp and feeling its warmth circulate his body. "Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I'll only take a few minutes of your time."

"No," Beatrice cut in. "Thank you. I have been petitioning the police for weeks. They seem to feel it's beneath them. Isn't it their job to enforce all the laws, not pick and choose?"

"Yes." Gilbert nodded, switching on the tape recorder and widening his eyes to acknowledge that the interview was now officially in progress.

"This is what they call a transitional neighborhood. I learned that when we bought two years ago. It is people like my

husband and me that are making that transition possible. Do you have a problem with the word gentrification?"

"No."

"Neither do I. It has taken on a stigma but I don't see why. It means that the neighborhood is getting better. I'm not only thinking about my property values, but the whole community."

"And the carts?"

"Listen, I have nothing against shopping carts. I use shopping carts when I go to the supermarket. That's where they belong. But once they step out of place, well, it's just absurd, isn't it? What's the point of being a shopping cart on a residential street? What exactly are you shopping for?"

"I've noticed that the homeless will often use them to cart their belongings or to collect cans and bottles. That serves a purpose, doesn't it?"

"For who? Not me. I recycle my old cans and bottles and newspapers—that's the law. I respect the rules of our society. It's not throwing trash on the street or, God forbid, living there. My husband and I work hard, saved to buy this house. It's the American Dream, isn't it? What's going on out there is a nightmare. The other day two street people were on my lawn fighting over junk. To make matters worse, a truck drove right up on my front yard. You can still see the damage to the grass. Do you want to take a picture?"

She didn't wait for Gilbert to answer. "What kind of world are we living in where I can't leave my house without crazy people fighting over shopping carts?"

"Can you describe these people?" Gilbert sat up in his seat.

"Can I describe them? They were vagrants. One was half-naked. He was on all fours like an animal. After that horrible man in the truck drove away with the cart, the naked man became very agitated. I feared for my life. It was like watching one of those nature documentaries, only I couldn't turn the channel."

This had to be the same man described in the blog and, if that was so, then the other homeless man was the author of the blog, Bob the Bum. The story was finally coming together.

"Beatrice," Gilbert asked, "if you saw these men again would you be able to recognize them?"

"I hope I never see them again, except in a police lineup."

"You've been very helpful. I'd like to digest what you've told me. Can I come back and ask you some follow-up questions?"

"That would be lovely. I truly appreciate your interest. It's about time someone addressed this problem. Maybe a story in the paper will force the police into action."

Gilbert stuffed his recorder into his pants pocket and stuck out his hand to shake as he stood in a hurry to leave. Beatrice took his hand and held it firmer than Gilbert expected. It actually hurt. He looked at her questioningly, but she just blinked and wouldn't let him go.

The crescent moon cut the night sky. Mac wanted to reach up and pluck it from its spot. It was a perfect shape and size to shave the two-day growth of beard that roughed the dip of his face. He'd clean and return it after use, ready to go back to whatever it does in the heavens. But, strain as he might, Mac couldn't get his hands on the moon. The shiny satellite watched Mac's struggle and appeared to wink at him as if acknowledging some cosmic joke. Mac didn't get it.

Mac ran a broken bottle across the sharp stubble of his cheeks, down the jawline and off his chin. He felt blood. But he was clean-shaven, except for a few scabs.

His head was bald and had been for many years, though Mac was not yet middle-aged. The hair on the rest of his body was more stubborn. It grew thin and fine, never the pelt he desired. If he were covered in fur there would be no need for even his bicycle shorts. Mac would have preferred that. He found material stifling.

Without thick hair for protection, Mac did his best to streamline his body, making up for shielding with speed. He shaved his legs and chest smooth. He was aerodynamic, even plucking

eyebrows and nose hairs. Mac looked alien, but felt indigenous. Buildings and streets, the people in their clothing and cars, covered up and encased as they shot mute through the landscape, were the true aliens. They could have come from the moon above his head.

Mac imagined the world before these parasites sucked it dry. Without man or nature, just a bare ball with shopping carts rolling unobstructed in herds of millions over the firmly packed earth. He pictured his naked black body centered among the metal and dirt, like the pupil in a great eye.

It was cold in the park. Mac's fire kept the night's chill at bay, but made it difficult to see beyond the flames. But he saw something, a flicker in the distance. Mac moved slowly from the bright warmth.

He crept silently through the darkness. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the night. When they did, he saw nothing but the skeleton of a playground silhouetted by faint trees. Streetlamps shined and some homes had porch lights burning, but the blackness in the park was complete and Mac wore it like a cloak as he ventured over the manicured grass.

He caught another shimmer from the corner of his eye and dropped to the ground. Mac spotted a shopping cart, alone and scared. This stately beast had been saddled with an outlandish plastic car welded to its nose, a toy for human children to play in as their parents shop. It was a monstrosity, an assault on decency. Mac's heart broke for the pitiful creature. It must have escaped, but where could it go looking like that? No other cart would mate with this mutant, this Frankenstein's monster of commerce.

"There, there, fellow," Mac whispered. He made sure to keep his body low so he appeared smaller and less threatening to the frightened cart. He mimicked a clicking sound he heard wild shopping carts make and that seemed to calm the creature.

It let Mac approach, but its wheels were shaky as if it was about to dart off at any moment. Mac reached out a hand and stroked its cage. It jumped, but didn't run.

"They really did a number on you." Mac looked over the terrible mutation. It had useless plastic wheels that didn't touch the ground, and inside a steering wheel with a red button that squeaked when pushed, upsetting the nervous cart.

There was nothing Mac could do. The attachment was permanent. To remove it would kill the cart. It was going to have to live with this. Mac didn't realize he would be living with it, too.

Mac was a hunter, a loner and wanderer in the urban wilderness, by trade. He lived off the land and traveled so light he often dreamt he was floating. If he could be naked, he would have been naked, but the one time he tried it Mac was arrested and spent the night in jail. He remembered the bars. It was as if he had been eaten by a shopping cart and was being digested within its metal guts.

After that Mac came to an uneasy compromise with society, living just beyond its grasp, both physically and mentally. He learned just how far he could pull away before it snatched him back. That border was a pair of bicycle shorts.

Now he had to carry something far more unwieldy.

Mac could have slaughtered and salvaged the cart and be done with it, but he was compelled to care for it, nurse it back to health, so it could fend for itself again, if that were possible. The toy car had been soldered to its face awkwardly and unbalanced the poor thing. It fell over easily and was unable to move steadily. Turns were a disaster. It needed a wide berth, and even then inevitably smacked its side against whatever was around.

The other carts ostracized it. Docile creatures, they can be unkind to those who stray from the pack. Carts are like cattle, but not cattle made of meat, cattle constructed of steel, stronger stuff that stays firmly in place or firmly out of place. Carts either were shackled by chain stores or idled in their idyll far from shopping centers, untied from the ties that bind. This cart stood on neither ground. This cart was made to cohabitated with people, to bond with people and be loved by them. That was unacceptable, a breach of unwritten law.

Man was to serve or sever from, not become emotionally entangled with. This was the cart's sin, unprofessional intermingling—it was distasteful to the dignity of both cart and man.

Nothing would return the cart to the pack's good graces, and Mac felt obligated to teach it how to live independently as he had learned himself. In a sense, they were not so different.

3.

“What am I going to call you?” Mac asked. They were strolling over uneven concrete under a hot sun that warmed the cart's handle. “If we're going to be together for a while you're going to need a name. That's how things work in this world.”

The cart and Mac had been doing little more than walking by day and finding a secluded spot at night to sleep. The cart had lost its skittishness. It no longer needed to be tied up at their campsite and even began to show some affection towards its human savior, at least in the manner of a cart. That meant it tried to snuggle into Mac's behind so they could rest one inside of the other.

“Don't do that!” Mac laughed. “You're my little butt buddy, aren't you? Why, that's what I'll call you: Buddy.”

And so began the adventures of Mac and Buddy, a tale told by no one, without thrills or chills. Mostly their story involved walking, or rolling in Buddy's case. Eating was absent from their simple narrative and, while Buddy didn't seem to mind the omission, Mac was beginning to drag.

Burdened with the responsibility of Buddy, Mac was unable to hunt and gather as had been his way. Next, according to history, was agriculture, unlikely to harvest the immediate crops Mac required. There was little choice but to get reacquainted with society and commerce.

A small pocket was stitched in the waistband of his shorts to hold keys. Mac kept a few dollars there that he had found over the years. The money had no value to him, but he kept it as a curiosity. Idle times he studied the dirty paper, trying to understand the various symbols printed on it. They were like puzzle pieces that, if Mac could align, would reveal a larger picture. That picture never materialized. It felt like admitting defeat to pass on the currency before deciphering its mysteries, but Mac's stomach made a strong case.

Mac and Buddy passed through the automatic doors. It was a hot day and so not unusual to see a shirtless man in shorts pushing a shopping cart. The fact that he was pushing a cart made for children was odd, but not odd enough to warrant more than a condescending look, or a jealous one from children. If people saw Mac's dirty, naked feet they might have sensed there was something different about this shopper, but few paid attention to him or anyone else. Colorful packaging blinded their eyes.

Mac rolled down one wide aisle and then the next under the harsh, shadow-less light. It was hard to maneuver Buddy and, more than once, taking a turn, Mac collided with a pyramid of cans or tower of boxes, toppling them. He picked up the fallen products and looked them over carefully like he had with the paper money, but their secrets were locked away just as tightly.

The various regions of the supermarket were as foreign as the four corners of the world to Mac. Cool mists, sprinkling rain forests of glistening, green delicacies growing in cold boxes, followed unnaturally regular storms of crackling thunder. Behind glass cabinets a glacier of frozen foods chilled in a frosty arctic.

He was ready to leave and cast his fate to the Dumpsters behind the supermarket when Buddy took the reins. Mac's arms straightened and his feet stumbled beneath him as the cart led the way down the aisles.

He was taken to a long, low cooler where sliced meats and cheese hung in orderly rows, the meats and cheese shuffled under

plastic in rich shades of pink and yellow. Mac's mouth began to water. He drooled on Buddy's handlebar.

"Sorry," Mac said, wiping away the spit and with it a layer of dirt. "Why, you're beautiful. Look at that chrome. Buddy, after we get ourselves something to eat, I'm going to spit and polish you to a shine."

Mac looked down at the buffed spot and saw a pair of eyes looking back at him. They weren't his eyes, which were large, clear and set apart. These were a beady couple that fought to remain afloat on a sea of crimson flesh.

"Sir," came a voice from behind his back, its tone both polite and disrespectful. "Please follow me."

Grabbing a package of sliced ham and dropping it in Buddy's basket, Mac turned and faced the Safeway manager. His white shirt was tucked into his waistband but still looked as if its tail was loose. He wore black pants and had matching tar hair.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," he said.

"Where's the register?" Mac asked, not moving.

"We'll pass them on the way out." The manager put a pudgy hand on Mac's hard bicep. "This way. Please."

People were watching. A little boy was asking his mother why there was a naked man in the supermarket. She distracted him by turning down the candy aisle.

"Thank you," Mac said, pulling his arm free. "But I don't need any help."

"Don't make me have to call the authorities."

"I'm buying something to eat. Isn't that what you're supposed to do in a supermarket?"

Mac shoved his hand down the front of his bicycle shorts and rooted around for an uncomfortable moment before returning from that nether region with a couple of crumpled bills between his fingers. The manager viewed his money as if it was sour milk. He squeezed his lips together tightly. The muscles of his jaw jerked. He made a squeaking sound with the sole of his black sneakers as he turned and walked away, disappearing amidst the other pink meats.

"Come on," Mac said, grabbing Buddy. "We're not welcome here."

They lined up at the express lane. The few people there turned their carts and headed for other registers. The disembodied voice of the manager disrupted the air with sharp static, calling for security. A tired little man in uniform made his way towards the cashier. Mac ignored him and placed the package of sliced ham on the black conveyor belt, watching it move mechanically to a young boy at the register.

"Paper or plastic?" he asked, as if scared of what Mac's answer might be.

"Neither," Mac said, picking up the ham after the boy scanned it. "We'll eat it here."

The security guard and the Safeway manager watched Mac and Buddy leave. They followed them out the automatic doors. The manager immediately began to sweat under the hot sun. The security guard kept one hand on his pepper spray.

"Where do you think you're going?" the manager shouted.

"I'm leaving," Mac said. "I've left."

"You're not leaving with that."

"I bought this."

"Not the ham, the cart. That's Safeway property and not to be removed from the premises under penalty of law."

"This is my cart."

The manager nodded to the security guard, who took a large walkie-talkie from his thick leather belt. He held it up to his face, nearly obscuring his entire head, and began speaking. Mac wasn't paying attention. He kept pushing Buddy towards the street.

The little security guard had replaced the walkie-talkie in his hand with pepper spray and ran to block Mac's path. The pepper spray was uncapped and pointed at Mac and Buddy.

"Take your ham and leave," the manager ordered. "We've called the police. They'll be here any minute. If you remove that cart from the parking lot I will have you arrested for possession of stolen property."

“How can I steal what's already mine?”

“Cross that line,” the manager pointed to the sidewalk, “and your legal use of that cart ends. I'll prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law.”

A crowd was gathering. Mac was increasingly uncomfortable under the scrutiny of strangers. He knew the longer he hesitated the worse it would get, so he dashed for the street. A stinging wet net slowed him down as the crowd dispersed, holding their faces against the toxic cloud.

Buddy rattled and rolled. It felt as if the cart was becoming undone. Mac stopped, fearing Buddy would fall apart, leaving only the dirty handlebar in his hands as he made good his escape.

The escape was made bad, however, by the arrival of a police car. Its flashing red lights excited the parking lot. The patrol car screeched to a dramatic stop and its door swung open, releasing a blue-clad officer.

He blocked Mac's exit. The officer placed a hand on Buddy and held him firmly. Mac tried to pull Buddy free.

“It's over,” the policeman said. “Come on, you know the drill.”

Mac didn't know the drill, so the officer had to show him.
The

