

The Talking Urinal

by Scott Cody

8-98

Typically, I wouldn't stop at the Maryland House Rest Area on a trip back from Gretchen's because it was only 30 minutes from my apartment. But I had stopped earlier at a rest area in New Jersey where I consumed enough iced tea to satisfy a bus of German tourists. So when I saw the first sign for the Maryland House, my swollen bladder insisted that I pull over.

It was near midnight on a Sunday in October. The only people on I-95 were truckers and lovers, and I fell into the latter category. When I got there, I swerved my car off the highway and onto the Maryland House exit ramp. Under the urgent circumstances, I did not slow down until I was 20 yards from the parking lot. The lot was mostly empty, and, to my good fortune, the closest possible space to the entrance was unoccupied. I abandoned my car on the oily black and gray asphalt and in the synthetic glare of the towering parking lot lights and made for the Maryland House. The bladder pain being too strong to run, I proceeded at a gallop. My body leaned towards the door, my legs jerked forward to both move me and to stop me from falling, my feet turned pigeon-toed, my knees buckled and knocked into each other, my shoes scraped the concrete with each painful step, my arms dangled uselessly at my side, and my mouth grimaced like a jack-o-lantern. This distinct and complicated body language could have signaled only one of two things to any on-looker, and either of those two things would have indicated that I was headed to the men's room. But I was alone in the parking lot and no one witnessed my procession.

I'm told that many truckers -- at least the male truckers -- have a tube and bottle mechanism that they can use in such emergencies so that they do not have to stop their haul for something as trivial as a trip to the urinal. Had I had one of these contraptions, maybe my life would be different now. Or would it? I don't know. But the fact that I had to use a urinal remains, and when I finally burst into the Maryland House men's room, it was more empty than the parking lot and I was left with my choice of urinals. I picked the urinal closest to me, and the relief was, well, memorable.

As I was zipping up my jeans, and looking down to monitor my progress, I heard someone say, "hey Jimmy, what's up?" This sudden interruption of the usual men's room noises startled me. Not that I feared for my life or my safety; the fact that the person knew my name assured me that I was not about to be mugged or stabbed. But it was a crude interruption, and it made me jump.

I looked up from my pants and turned to my right to see who spoke. To my confusion, no one was there. I looked behind me and then to my left: no one.

"Jimmy, over here."

I turned back to my right -- the voice was coming from my right -- and no one was there! I crouched down and peered under the long wall of toilet stalls expecting to see occupied shoes and pants when the voice said, "Jimmy, right here, man. The urinal."

This made no sense, but I turned and looked at the urinals anyway. One of these urinals had just claimed to be speaking, and I somehow determined it was two away from the urinal I had just finished using. I stared at that urinal. Incredulity, confusion, fright, I felt all of these emotions and more and I am sure my facial expressions betrayed each and every one.

"Dude, what's going on?" said the urinal.

Not satisfied with "a talking urinal" as a sufficient explanation for this disembodied voice, I continued to search for its source.

"Hey, Jimmy, over here. The urinal. Yo. You gonna talk to me or you just gonna stand there."

I looked at the urinal and stood silent for a second. "Funny," I said, then continued to look for the true source of the voice.

"Funny? You meet a talking urinal and all you can say is funny?"

I walked along the wall of stalls, pushing open doors, looking for someone, anyone, a voice source, or, if this were really true, a witness. I realized soon enough that I was alone in this little men's room of horrors. Well, alone with who ever was making the urinal talk.

"Funny?" the urinal reiterated.

"Funny," I said. "Peculiar," I clarified. I began to inspect the urinal itself. A microphone. A speaker. A camera. All of these must be hidden somewhere.

"Peculiar? Peculiar is eating sweet and sour pork with red wine. Peculiar is sleeping with your contact lenses in. Peculiar is telling Gretchen that you think she's unhappy when you know she isn't. That's peculiar. This? This is a talking urinal."

These references from the urinal -- the sweet and sour pork, the contact lenses, the "you're unhappy" conversation -- were personal. And recent. The previous night, Gretchen and I ordered sweet and sour pork for dinner, and had red wine with it. Then, I fell asleep with my contact lenses in. In the morning, Gretchen and I had one of our serious conversations, and I told her I thought she was unhappy, and we fought. The fact that the urinal was talking about these events calmed me. It reassured me that a friend was behind this talking urinal gag because how else would a urinal know about my recent personal life? But the calm only lasted a fraction of a moment. The events referenced were *too* personal and *too* recent. The only people who knew of them were Gretchen and myself. And I was fairly confident that Gretchen was not the type of person who would race out of Manhattan with a trunkful of audio/visual equipment to beat me to a urinal at a rest stop in Maryland, rig the urinal to talk to me and sit back and laugh. No. Not at midnight on a Sunday. Not ever. The initial calm subsided, and confusion resumed.

I stared. Stupefied.

"Jimmy, wake up, " the talking urinal said, abruptly. "Enough with the chit-chat. We've got something important to talk about."

Not knowing what else to do in such a situation, I returned to my previous strategy of seeking a local source for this voice. I looked to the sinks. I stared at the mirrors. I checked under the stalls again.

"Talking urinal here, Jimmy. No candid camera. No prank. Look, I can tell you're not comfortable with this, so I'll get to the point. She's gonna dump you. Like a wheelbarrow of manure, Jimmy. Like a bucket of giblets. Yesterday's recycling. It's over. Toast. *Sayonara*. See ya. *Hasta la vista*. Drop you like a politician's name at a Washington happy hour. Like a hot turnip. Wise up and be prepared."

"Okay," I said, patronizingly. We exchanged some platitudes while I peered left and right looking for signs of human life. Then I left the men's room, confident that the person or persons behind this gag would soon enough reveal themselves and we'd all have a good laugh. I walked to my car,

knowing that the perpetrators would be in the back seat, and we'd all have a good laugh. I drove home, sure as last Tuesday that the culprits would be waiting at my door with a recording of the entire event.

I missed work the next day. Not because I was in a car accident. Not because I was sick. Not because I was playing hooky and mountain biking instead. No. I missed work because I was up all night getting dumped like a load of recycling.

After I left the Maryland House I continued my journey home. I spent most of the time trying to deduce who could be behind the talking urinal gag. But the entire episode slipped my mind when I arrived in my Fells Point neighborhood and began the arduous search for the rare parking space. When I got into my apartment at 1:00 AM, I had completely forgotten about the talking urinal, written it off as a prank.

There was only one message on my answering machine. Gone all weekend, I thought, and only one message. The message was from Gretchen. "Jimmy," she said, "give me a call when you get home. We have to talk." It was not the good "we have to talk." Not the "I miss you already, we have to talk." Not the "I'm quitting my job and moving to Baltimore to be with you, we have to talk." No. It was the bad "we have to talk."

I called her and, as foreshadowed by the talking urinal, she dumped me. The long distance was too much, she was feeling too pressured, too restricted, and she felt like she could not enjoy New York. Then, like an afterthought, she added that she wanted to see other people. I pleaded my case, but to no avail. We broke up until 4:00 in the morning. I spent the remainder of the night in turmoil, feeling like my breath had been sucked from my lungs. When 8:00 AM rolled around and I was still awake, it was obvious that I was unfit for work.

I called the office and left a message for Tim, my boss, that I would not be in. At the time, I worked for one of the nation's larger management consulting firms, and Tim was a corporate whore. As a boss, he put the "rat" in "autocratic." The message I left was a lie. I said that my car had broken down in New York, that I would have it fixed that morning and return to work on Tuesday. After I got off the phone with my office, I finally fell asleep.

Our break up may have been foreshadowed by more than the urinal. Gretchen and I dated for three years. Eight months prior to my encounter with the urinal, Gretchen's employer transferred her to New York. We said we'd try to keep it going, me in my hometown of Baltimore, she in her metropolitan fantasy of Manhattan. I drove up to see her twice a month. She almost never came back to Baltimore. I sent her flowers at work. She was seldom home when I called. We both became short tempered with each other.

But the Monday that I missed work due to heart ache, I did not realized any of this. Hindsight is 20/20, but it takes a while to come into focus. I did not understand that our demise was foreshadowed by her -- or more precisely, by our -- actions. In fact, I was in such a state that I did not even remember that it had been predicted by the talking urinal.

On Tuesday, I returned to work, somber and depressed. I moped around the office, accomplishing little. At some point, I found myself in front of another urinal and was finally reminded of my encounter at the Maryland House. I began to think of possible masterminds. People at work? No, they don't know enough about my personal life? Friends from college? No, they would not have been able to describe my weekend in such detail.

I spent the next two days perplexed. My love life was no longer distracting me from talking urinals; rather, the talking urinal was now distracting me from my love life. I spent many of my waking hours (and in my state, most of my hours were waking hours) mentally running through all of my acquaintances in an attempt to establish motive and M.O. But without success.

By the time Thursday arrived, I had become obsessed with identifying the source of the talking urinal. I left work at 6:00 (which is early for the management consulting world) and drove back to Maryland House. The men's room was busy with ten or twelve patrons. The buzz of the fluorescent lights and the drip drip dripping of the sinks were overtoned by coughing, snortin, zipping and flushing. I stood by the grimy sinks and stared at the talking urinal. I made no attempt to hide my inspection from the other people in the room. I just stood there and stared. I wanted the urinal to talk to me because then I could determine if it was something heard by everyone or if, like in the movies, it was something that only I could hear. But the urinal was silent.

I do not know how long I stood in the Maryland House men's room, immersed in the institutional smell of the pink hand soap, the spicy smell of the urinal pucks and the abrasive smell of the ammonia-based floor cleaner. I can't remember how many people shot annoyed glares my way as I blocked their access to the black box that dispenses brown cardboard towels. I don't recall how many fathers reached out to grab their little son's hands as they walked past me, the strange man staring at the urinal. And I can't explain why I was never approached by the rest stop's laughable security guard and asked to leave the men's room if I had no business. But I stood there, quietly, focused.

Eventually, as chance would have it, I was left alone with the urinal. All of the men had left their room and none would arrive for a couple of seconds. In that brief interval, the urinal spoke.

"Hey Jimmy, good to see you."

"What the fuck is this?" I said abruptly.

"Talking urinal Jimmy. Listen. I'm glad you're here. I need to tell you something."

At that moment, a fat, bearded man in a maroon and white checkered flannel shirt and a filthy pair of ill-fitting denim jeans entered the men's room. I was standing three feet from the talking urinal, focusing on it intently, and he was somewhat taken aback by my seemingly strange behavior. He walked around me hesitantly, abandoned what appeared to be his original intention of using a urinal, and walked into a stall. I waited patiently. The fat man left without flushing.

"Urinals don't talk," I began. "And I don't know how you know this stuff about me, but it is starting to lose its amusing qualities."

"This urinal talks, Jimmy. And this urinal says that you're in trouble. That report, Jimmy. Tim's gonna rip you a new asshole. You should have written the report."

Several bodies entered the men's room as I asked, "what report?" But there was no answer. A tour bus had just emptied. And this was no German tour bus. It was from Florida and it was filled with twenty God-fearing elderly men in plaid pants with complicated belt buckles.

I stood there for a while contemplating the urinal. And then I realized what report it was talking about. I had a financial status report due the next day, and I had done none of the work. In my post-

dump depression and talking urinal confusion I had forgotten all about this most important report. "Shit!" I exclaimed, and stormed out of the men's room.

The arithmetic was simple. It was 9:30 PM. I had 11 hours before I need to be at work with the report, and the report required over 24 hours of work. "There is no way," I told myself.

But the fast paced, pressed shirt, clenched teeth, indegestive world of high priced management consulting does not understand the phrase "there is no way," and I was at the office within an hour. My intent was to stay up all night, fueled by the caffeine of syrupy carbonated colas and the empty nutrients of vending machine snacks, and churn out the numbers for the financial status report. But everything takes longer when the office is shut down. Instead of being able to call work mates and ask them for a piece of information, I had to venture to their cubicle or office and sort through piles of the paper, or log onto their computer and track down spreadsheets, memos, and letters. The copier needed to warm up, and so did the printer and coffee maker. It was soon apparent that I would not finish the report by 8:30 am. In fact, the hassles of working in an empty office were slowing me down rather than speeding me up. Come morning, Tim would only focus on the fact that the report was unfinished, not that I had spent my entire night trying to produce something. There was no such thing as almost finished. I knew this, was well aware of it, and the rational action would have been to go home and get some sleep so that I could at least be lucid when I encountered Tim in the morning. But that's the thing about management consulting, anyone who would act rationally in such a situation would not take a job with a management consulting firm to begin with.

I stayed up all night. Dreary. Giddy. Delirious. At 4:00 AM I could not concentrate. I just sat there and stared at my computer monitor. At 6:00 I got a second wind, which I lost at 6:30. At 7:30 I thought I was doing something worthwhile. And at 8:30 I went to the men's room to put my suit on. I stared at the urinal. It said nothing.

"You'd think I'd hear talking urinals after a night like this," I said to myself out loud. Then a toilet flushed behind a stall door and I realized I was not in the bathroom alone. Tim emerged from a stall and looked at me. My stomach made a full rotation and I felt something the size of a golf ball in my throat.

"You look like shit," he said in his pompous, condescending, 'I-make-twice-your-salary-but-we-can-still-be-friends-so-long-as-you-say-how-much-when-I-say-kiss-my-ass' tone.

I took a short but deep breath. I felt like Tim was my dad and I had just wrecked his car. "Tim," I said with a dramatic pause to indicate that I knew I screwed up, "we have to talk." He shot me a disappointed look. 'You didn't wreck my car, son?' it said. But he said nothing. "The Meckinger financial report, it... well, it's not done." I looked down at the pipes under the sink while I waited to hear how long I'd be grounded this time.

Once again, the talking urinal was right. Tim ripped me a new asshole. He told me I was lazy. He told me his nine year old niece could have written that report. He told me that I would have to explain my incompetence to Hugh Johnson, the VP who was coming in from Houston that morning to hear about the financial status of the Meckinger account. He told me I was on thin ice. Useless, he said. Don't you want a future with this company, he asked. Inadequate. Bungling. Unqualified.

I can't say how long I was there with Tim. Eventually, he told me to finish the report by 4:00 and he "would deal with Johnson." I worked through the day, I don't know how. I don't know what kept me going. And at 3:30, I brought Tim a completed financial status report. Upon receiving the report, Tim saw it fit to continue deriding me. "I have never," he said, emphasizing each word individually for a melodramatic effect, "seen anyone so irresponsible." I went home for the weekend.

I was asleep on my couch within 15 minutes of getting into my apartment. It must have been about 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening, I don't know. I woke up a couple of hours later, around 11:00, embraced by the couch, feeling crusty. My body was too groggy to move, so I just lay there on the couch and passively let the days events wash over me. The more I thought about the report, however, the more I got frustrated. "Tim's a prick," I assured myself, but it did not make me feel any better. So I began to think of pointed rebuttals that I could have used to put Tim in his place, had I been more self-confident. "If that's your way of managing, no wonder no one stays in this department," and "if you're so good at generating these reports, why haven't you been promoted in three years?" and "look Tim, it's a fact that you are better able to manage if you treat your employees like equals," and "you couldn't find your asshole

with a handful of fish hooks. I quit!" I uttered some of these phrases out loud, but the entire exercise was pure fantasy. I knew I'd never have the guts to say such things, at least not until I am thirty.

Soon enough my thoughts drifted from the real life episodes of my fantasy world to the fantastic encounters of my real world. That is, the talking urinal. Twice I have talked with this urinal, twice it has predicted my future, and twice it has been correct. This bothered me.

Once again, my head began to swim in this confusion. I got up from my couch and went to the kitchen. The kitchen always helps me think. I stood there by the sink -- the think sink -- and stared at the Ansel Adams photo on the monthly calendar that hung crookedly on the wall. It was a black and white photo of El Capitan. Granite face, gray/black sky, talking urinal. Talking urinal, white puffy cloud, talking urinal. A urinal can't talk, I reasoned. It has no vocal cords. It has no tongue. It has no brain.

I got in my car and drove back to the Maryland House. It was late and the Maryland House was empty. I stormed through the men's room door, determined to get to the bottom of this urinal issue, even if a whole team of doctors in white lab coats had to pull me out of there.

"Jimmmy," said the urinal, "good to see ya! Hey, nice job on that report, kid. I gotta admit, you got a lot more done than I expected."

"You -- I -- what? If you can see the future, why are you surprised?"

"Oh, no, Jimmy. I can't see the future. I can tell you what will happen, but I can't see the future."

"There's a difference?" I asked.

"A big one. Anyway, me and the toilets from the ladies room -- cute little things, you should see 'em -- we were talking and they thought you'd be OK, but me, I underestimated you, I thought you'd get nothing done."

"So all these toilets can talk?" I asked, gesturing to the collection of porcelain that filled the room.

"No no no no. Just me Jimmy-boy. And I ain't no toilet. I'm a urinal."

"OK, this is ridiculous. You win. Whoever's pulling this prank, you got me. I've been had. Now I'm ready to see who's behind the curtain."

"Jimmy. Jimmy. You're all discombobulated, man. Don't blow a gasket. What's wrong? What don't you understand?"

"You! THIS! I'm standing here in the middle of a fucking rest stop getting my fortune told by a fucking urinal and you don't know what I can't understand?" The frustration began to make me light-headed. "Urinals CAN'T TALK so I know someone's behind this. And it's just not funny 'cause my life's falling apart right now and I can't even figure out how to get it back together because I'm spending all my time trying to determine how a urinal could talk and then I gotta drive all the way out to this fucking rest stop to get my future told by a thing that gets pissed on all day by truckers."

"Easy Jimmy. We're all friends here, right? OK, let's work this through. Where do you want me?"

"What?"

"Where do you want me? You don't like coming out here to talk with me, where would be a better place?"

"Uh... my home I guess."

"Your home it is. Where?"

"Where? I don't know. I don't really have any space for a urinal." It started to seem like this conversation was not going where I expected.

"You don't need a urinal, Jimmy. I can be anywhere. A toilet, table, teapot, tie rack --"

"Tie rack," I said.

"Tie rack?"

"Tie rack."

"OK, see you there."

"See me where?" I asked, but there was no answer. "Wait," I said. "YOU HAVE NOT ANSWERED MY QUESTIONS!" I exclaimed, but there was just silence from the urinal.

"I must be losing it," I explained to myself over and over as I drove home. "I have got to be losing it."

When I got to my apartment, I unlocked the door, opened it, and stepped inside without turning on the light. I waited there for a moment. The only light in the apartment was coming from the hallway behind me. I listened for something, but I was not sure what it was. I turned on the light and slowly closed the door. Again, I listened. If someone is here, I thought, I can't hear them. I walked slowly down the hall and turned on the light in the bedroom. As the light flickered on I realized I was scared. I walked to my closet and listened. Softly. I put my hand on the doorknob. Ridiculous, I thought. I took a deep breath then yanked the door open.

"Jesus Christ what took you so long?" yelled the voice from within. It startled me and I jumped back. I felt my body rush with adrenaline. "Jimmy?" the voice yelled. "Turn the light on Jimmy."

I took another deep breath, stepped towards the closet, reached in and turned on the light. "Did you walk here or do you drive that slow?" said the voice. It really did sound like it was coming from my tie rack. I crouched down to look under all the shirts and pants that were hanging from the bar in the closet to see if there was anyone behind. Nothing. I looked at the tie rack. It was a simple looking tie rack. It looked like the head of a garden rake. All of my ties were hanging from the teeth, my best ties in the front and my worst ties in the back. "What's the problem Jimmy?"

I thought for a moment. "Please, please explain to me what is going on."

"You wanted me in your tie rack, bada-bing, bada-boom, I'm in your tie rack."

"And who are you?" I said, slowly, pronouncing each word individually to express my mounting anger.

"Jimmy... talking tie rack. And listen, we half to talk. Now, this job of yours, Jimmy --"

"Stop it!" I screamed. I reached into the closet, grabbed the tie rack, turned and threw it at my bed. Ties went streaming off and they left a trail that looked like a bunch of fat-headed, colorful snakes were migrating from my bed to the closet. I looked at the tie rack which lay on the clump of sheets and blankets in the center of my bed. There was silence. Had I killed it? Had I unplugged it? More likely the latter. I slowly made my way to the edge of the bed. I could not see any wires reaching from the tie rack. I bent over to inspect it closer, as if it were an alien life form. It still looked like an every day tie rack. I reached out to turn it over.

"What the fart was that for Jimmy?" the tie rack said, and once again I was startled by it's sudden interruption of the silence. "What the freak was it for?"

"You're real," I said softly.

"You bet your chachees I'm real. You know I'm real Jimmy. You don't have to throw me across the flipping room to know that I'm real."

"But how?"

"Pick me up, Jimmy, put me back in the closet where I belong, and hang your frigging ties off me."

No longer trusting my own instincts, I stopped thinking for myself and just did as the tie rack said. I hung it back in the closet and draped my ties over it, out of order.

When I was done, the tie rack said, "Jimmy, the sun's about to come up. Get some sleep."

When I woke up on Saturday, still in my clothes from Friday, my alarm clock was blank, and the apartment was a little more quiet than usual. I reached over to the lamp beside my bed and twisted the switch to turn it on. There was a 'click' but no light came on. I twisted it a couple more times. 'Click, click, click.' No light. "Shit, the powers out," I said, out loud to myself. I got out of bed and walked over to my bedroom window. There was daylight. I looked down the street to the traffic light at the corner. It wasn't working. I walked back to my bed and grabbed my watch from the night stand. It said 2:00. I sat on the bed and scratched my head; figuring out where I left off the day before is the hardest part of each day.

Hoping what I remembered was a dream, I walked to the closet. The door was closed. As I did the night before, I put my hand on the knob, took a deep breath, and opened the door. Silence. "You there?" I asked.

"Yup."

"Power's out," I said.

"Yup."

"You gonna be here for a bit?"

"Yup."

"I need to go get some breakfast. . . and figure this out," I said. Then, partially out of habit and partially because I thought it would be funny, I asked, "do you need anything while I'm out?"

"I'd love some Thai food," said the tie rack.

I stood there for a moment with my hand on the door. And then I got it. I turned and started closing the door.

"Get it Jimmy?"

"I get it," I said, as the door snapped shut.

As I was leaving the room I heard a muffled "Thai food, HA!" come from the closet.

The neighborhood bagel shop had the best breakfast around, and I figured the line would be short at 2:00 in the afternoon. As I was walking up the street, I passed a BGE service truck. The service crew was below the street fixing the power outage. Of course, even though I saw the signs of neighborhood-wide power outage, it never occurred to me that the bagel shop would be powerless. It was. They were out of bagels and had no way to make more.

I decided to catch a bus to the Inner Harbor and eat there. I found an overpriced junkfood counter at one of the touristy pavilions and chose my breakfast from their limited menu. I went outside with my food and sat by the water. The sky was overcast and everything was gray. The boats in the harbor were gray, the brick sidewalks were gray, the tourists were gray. The water was black, but the reflection on top of the water was an oily gray. I could see my office building among the downtown sky scrapers. Normally the windows of the building reflect green, but today they reflected gray. I ate my food.

The whole talking urinal/talking tie rack thing had me so confused that I started to take it for granted. I had stopped wondering who could be behind it or how these inanimate objects could talk and I had started wondering why it chose my life to meddle in. What had I done to deserve this vocal visitor? Did other people have talking urinals? I am not a religious person, but was this God? Or my guardian angel? Fitting, I thought, I have a guardian angel, and it assumes the forms of a urinal and a tie rack. And why did it have to be such a prick?

I got up and tried to walk off my thoughts. I walked among the shops and tourists. I stopped and watched a street performer. I found another restaurant and bought more food. I even went to one of those large wrap-around screen theaters and watched a movie about Africa. I caught a water taxi back to Fells Point.

The taxi was virtually empty. It was dark out and it was getting quite cold on the water. As I sat there lulled by the droning sound of the overworked engine, I realized that I was scared of the tie rack. I was afraid to go home because I did not want to talk to the tie rack. It frightened me to have this omnipotent being in my home. That is why I spent the day screwing around.

But acknowledging the fear of the tie rack did not dilute it, and when I got off the taxi in Fells Point I ran into two guys from work who were headed to dinner at one of the pubs, so I joined them. Indeed, eating and drinking and talking shop and drinking and flirting with women and walking from bar to bar and drinking and stumbling home and passing out served me very well in avoiding speaking with or thinking about the tie rack.

Sunday started much the same as Saturday: I was in my clothes and on my bed. I was confused. However, this time it felt like someone was using a bicycle pump to inflate my brain and like my mouth was stuffed with sandpaper. The alarm clock was flashing the numbers 12:00 over and over again, as if it were the heartbeat of the room. I looked at my watch. It was 2:30 in the afternoon. The throbbing in my head and the alarm clock pulse were out of synch. I stayed on my bed for a while, just looking at the paint bubbles in the ceiling.

When I finally mustered the energy to get out of bed, I went straight to the kitchen and got some water and some aspirin. Then I brushed my teeth in the bathroom. As I was drying my face, I heard the tie rack saying: "Jiiiiiiiiimy. . . here Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy. . . Jiiiiiiiiimy," from the closet. I dragged my feet through the bedroom, opened the closet door and turned on the light. The bright incandescent light made me wince.

"Geeeeze you look like shit," observed the tie rack.

"Fuck you," I replied.

"Awwww. Jimmy's pissed 'cause he didn't get any."

"Fuck you."

"You know you'll never pick up women like that. I don't know why you even try. You don't try to talk with them when you're sober. And when you're drunk, you just make an ass of yourself."

"Who asked you?" I said. The force of gravity being too much for my hungover bones, I sat on the floor inside the doorway.

"Do you remember what you did last night?"

"Yes," I moaned.

"You asked that woman to see her stomach. Then you bent over and put your lips on her stomach and blew and tried to make a farting sound."

"Yes," I moaned. My head fell back and I let the door jam support it.

"But it didn't make a farting sound. And you spilled beer on her sandals. And she and her friend left."

"Jesus, don't you have anything nice to say?" I whined.

"Jimmy, you're life's a shambles."

"Who asked you?"

"Who asked me? Look at you! You lost your girlfriend, you acted like a buffoon in front of your pals last night, you can't even sit up, and you're going to get fired tomorrow. I'm John Friggin Wayne here to save your ass, and all I get is 'who asked you?'"

"Fired?" I asked without moving. "Did you say fired?"

"That's right. Hit the streets, pal. Empty out your locker. Canned. Axed. Bounced. Sacked. Pull down your skirt, your pink slip is showing. And don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out. Fired."

"Good," I observed.

"Good? You wore a bald spot on their hairy asses you kissed 'em so much. And then they turn and issue you the ultimate insult and you say 'good?' Christ. You gotta stick up for yourself man. You think I let these wirery hangers push me around? No. I'm a tie rack. And I stand up for myself."

"That job has been nothing but misery since the day I started. I'll be happy to get out of there."

"So you can go let someone else push you around? You know, that job might have been better if you stood up for yourself from the git-go. And you know what us tie racks say, Jimmy: no time like the present."

"Yeah, but--"

"No time like the present, Jimmy."

"I --"

"No time. Not like the present."

"Fuck you," I said, and walked into the kitchen.

The refrigerator was empty and I was annoyed, so I left the apartment and walked to the bagel shop up the street. This time the power was on and they had bagels. I ordered some breakfast. Or lunch. Or what ever meal goes with whatever time of day it was. And I sat there and thought. Seems I've been thinking a lot lately, I thought. What a shitty week it's been. No wonder I've been thinking a lot.

If it were true that I would be fired the next day, and why wouldn't it be true given the tie rack/urinal's track record, then this week would probably go down as the worst week in my personal history. I could not figure out why I would be fired. The Meckinger report was a pretty big fuck-up. But that was rare. Other than that, I had been pretty average. I was not outstanding, but I was no less productive than the next guy.

On and on I wondered why they would fire me. But I never wondered if they would fire me. I trusted the tie rack, but I also knew the management in this company, and they were irrational sociopaths who were known to say that anyone who wouldn't work an 80 hour work week was not a dedicated, desirable "associate." It would be just like those bastards to fire me for no reason more compelling than the fact that I botched the Meckinger report. In fact, as I sat there stewing in the heat of the bagel shop, I could envision Tim's overbearing and overacted face of earnest as he tactlessly told me I was fired. "The company has decided," he will say. The company. What a crock of shit. The company decided nothing. The company is comprised of a bunch of over-worked, miserable, under-achieving over-achievers who lack the self respect and dignity to stand up for themselves. No. This decision was made by a two or

three insecure corporate lackeys who believe that they should rule with the stick and that a positive comment from any of the company's management would set the company back six years.

"I won't stand for it," I said out loud. And that's when I remembered I was in the bagel shop. I stood up and left.

I stormed into the apartment and walked straight to the closet. "You know you're right," I said as I turned the light on.

"Jimmy, when will you learn that I'm *always* right?"

"These bastards just want me to roll over. And they want to use me as an example to show the others that if they don't roll over, they'll be fired too."

"That's right Jimmy."

"By letting them fire me, not only am I disrespecting myself, which I've done from day one there, but I'm contributing to -- advancing, in fact -- their totalitarian management style!"

"Do tell Jimmy."

"Well, you know what? Fuck them. That's what." I was wired, my hands were shaking, and I was out of breath.

"I'm so happy to hear you say that Jimmy. I'm proud. You know? Like a father, Jimmy."

"Yes, but what do I do?"

Monday morning I got up early. God-awful early. But I wasn't tired. My body was rushing with anticipation, with excitement and with a little bit of fear. OK, maybe with a lot of fear. I took a shower and put on my best suit. I checked myself out in the mirror. I wanted to look my best for this all-important day.

"Wish me luck," I said to the tie rack.

"You're the man, Jimmy. You ARE the man!"

I caught a bus downtown. It was 6:00 in the morning and I did not know busses ran that early, but they did and this bus had about 15 people on it. The bus let me off right in front of my office building. I took a deep breath of the fresh, crisp, cold fall morning air, and looked up to my floor. Then I

went inside. It was still early enough that I needed to use a special key-card to get in the front door and I had to deactivate the alarm to enter our office. I went to my desk, put my briefcase on top, turned on my computer, took off my jacket and rolled up my shirtsleeves.

The first thing I did was copy all of my personal files from my computer. They fit on two small floppy disks, which I stuck in my shirt pocket. Then I deleted the personal files from my computer. I went to the directory that contained all of the files related to the Meckinger project, and I deleted them. I went to other directories and deleted other files: financial status reports, project status reports, draft reports, final reports, cost estimates, budgets, proposals, memos, all gone, all deleted.

Next, I went to my file cabinet. I opened the top drawer, stuck my hand in a folder and pulled out all of the papers in it. Then I opened up another folder and stuffed them inside. I grabbed the papers that were in that folder and stuffed them in yet another folder. I opened another drawer and grabbed the papers from a folder in that drawer and stuffed them in a folder in the first drawer. It took me about 15 minutes, but I was successful in placing each and every piece of paper in the file cabinet in an unrelated folder.

I turned back to my computer and wrote the following message:

Dear Corporate Servants:

I have decided to liberate myself from corporate bondage. I REFUSE to surrender my personal FREEDOM to the tyrants that run this company. It's just not worth it! I hope you all find happiness. And I hope that each time you hear the un-quelled chirp of an INDIVIDUAL cricket, you are reminded that you too can be free.

- Jimmy

I paced this message in an e-mail and sent it to everyone in the Baltimore office.

I opened my briefcase and inside were two filthy bustling zip-lock bags with tiny holes punched in them. I could tell that the girl at the pet store thought it was strange that I needed 1,000 crickets for my iguana at so late on a Sunday night. But she sold them to me anyway. At 10 cents a piece, revenge only cost me \$100. I pulled one bag out of my briefcase and opened it. The stench hit me like a slap in the face. It smelled like frog shit. Or, more accurately, like cricket shit. I stuck my hand in the bag and grabbed a handful. The feeling of ten or twenty crickets crawling all over each other inside my fist gave me shivers of repulsion and shivers of power. I grabbed both bags and started walking down the corridor. I sprinkled crickets inside offices, under desks, behind book cases, into air conditioners, into file cabinets, into computer vents, and into desk drawers. Like Johnny Appleseed, I roamed the halls of our office sowing my noisy seeds. It took me about twenty minutes to complete the task. I wanted to make sure the crickets were evenly distributed and were well hidden. I hoped that they would start families and colonies, and live in this office for years to come.

Back at my desk, I turned off my computer, put my jacket on, grabbed my briefcase, took one last look, and went to Tim's office. On his desk I found his personal stationary and his best fountain pen. In very large letters, I wrote "YOU CAN'T FIRE ME, I QUIT! -J. M." I figured it would drive him insane trying to figure out how I found out he was going to fire me. He was the type of person that would let this eat at him. I hoped it gave him an ulcer. I left the note on his chair and put his pen in my shirt pocket with the computer disks.

The daily planner on his desk caught my eye. "Aw, what the hell?" I said. I opened the planner, ripped out four or five pages from the current and next month and stuffed them in my pocket.

My watch read 8:00. "Perfect," I said to myself. I left the office and waited by the elevators outside the lobby. This will be the final touch, I thought. I stood there, briefcase in hand, just waiting. A couple of people got off the elevators while I waited. Some said "hi" while others just looked at me strange. Then, after about five minutes, an elevator opened and Tim walked off. I immediately started walking towards that elevator. "Hey Tim," I said, as I walked past him.

Tim looked up from his newspaper. "Oh, hey, Jimmy," he said absently. I was almost at the elevator when he said, "oh, Jimmy?"

I stuck my hand inside the elevator to stop the doors from closing and turned my head back to face him. "Yes?" I said.

"Don't go to far, we need to talk today," he said.

"OK, I'll be right back." I got on the elevator, pushed the button for the lobby and smiled as the doors closed and he walked away.

The bus ride home was euphoric. I could not sit. I felt truly liberated. I smiled out the window as we passed through Little Italy. I felt myself bouncing I was so excited.

Walking from the bus stop to my apartment I felt like I was walking home on the last day of the third grade. Inside my apartment, I threw my briefcase on the couch and went straight to the closet. I flung the door open wide and smiled my biggest smile yet. "I did it!" I announced. But there was no sound from within. I turned on the light. "You there?" I asked. The tie rack just hung there, motionless from the closet. "Tie rack?" I said, as anxiety started to overcome me. Silence. "Tie rack?"