

Balance

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyrighted. That © means something--while I'm giving the book away, in a manner of speaking, someone will pay a pretty penny for the movie rights, lol. I'll pick the soundtrack, I'll have a hand in casting and as technical advisor...I'm staying up nights waiting.

Writing this book was never an Ahab deal; I had kids to raise, a career to nurture. I actually began this circa 1988, schlepping a Smith-Corona *word processor* into work every day, typing between phone calls (this was before PCs). Those were the days of Senna/Prost, etc. and those cars are the ones I imagined as I wrote this. Similarly, I imagined Don Peterson as being one of the last all-rounders, one who had exposure to various racing disciplines.

Too much money involved in motorsport these days, regrettably, to drop everything and jump into some random car on a random track. Sponsors today *will* frown upon you showing up for your primary job with a broken wrist...

Sad, also that the F1 drivers of tomorrow are pre-teen kids are being groomed for Formula car racing to the exclusion of any other type. Childhoods are being lost; or at least a familiar type of childhood, one away from a microscope.

This isn't a technical book—I want more than five people worldwide to read it! One thing that changed over decades of editing was the elimination of about 94 percent of the sex. And I like the book a lot better because of it.

I started devouring F1 in 1973, and I don't apologize for this story not being bleeding-edge Hamilton/Vettel/Alonso contemporary. If *Archer* can be in an ambiguous era, so can this. Likewise, aviation anoraks will kill themselves trying to catalog all the ambiguities in Don's itineraries.

Along those lines, those readers who know of my other hobbies will recognize some of my characters' names and the odd shout-out.

Inspirations? Other than the authors mentioned in the story, a book my mom gave me when I was about seventeen or so convinced me that I could write a narrative: Weldon Hill, *The Iceman*. Buy it now, it'll be worth the search. Dan Jenkins makes a long story out of many short ones, something that I tried to emulate—to a degree. A lady named Janet Tanaka ruthlessly edited and then ran my first published article in her *Volcano Quarterly*, my submission noted the relationship between pre-internet media, society, and coverage of volcanic eruptions. A real bodice-ripper, trust me...

And Beth Hynes. You're in this book—in fact, you're *all over* this book. We both are. And in everything else that matters.

Houston:

Saturday night, Houston-by-God, Texas. The bar was more Tonk than Honky. I was getting on the outside of a Shiner Light Blonde at a suburban nightclub owned by a radio talker who I had come across on satellite and developed a friendship with. This was the one place in town that I could trust and was out of the way enough that I could decompress after a frustrating day.

My innkeeper friend was at home being a family man, but the manager had been apprised of my visit and I was shown a booth, beer, and brisket. Now I was listening to a good band playing delightfully nasty Texas western-ish blues. I was somewhat pissed that I had missed Junior Brown by a week, but if that's all I had to complain about...

After a while, the manager brought over a water to go, along with my bill and a long-sleeve chambray shirt which advertised the club. We discussed current events as the Ten O'clock news came on. I noted the weather forecast for Sunday—90 Fahrenheit, 75 dew point but no rain—and inevitably came the sports. The Astros were in the middle of a homestand which was remarked upon, then it was time for the coverage of qualifying for the Chase Houston Grand Prix presented by Shell.

"That's a mouthful," she mentioned.

"Too much money in sports these days," I replied. I hoped that was vague enough.

No such luck: "Paolo Tambora starts his Ferrari from the pole in Sunday's Formula One Houston Grand Prix, having broken the track record with a speed of ninety-one miles an hour. Jan Van Bemmelen lines up second, while Paolo's teammate Manuel Rittmann is third. Last year's winner, America's own Don Peterson, languishes back in ninth place, his worst effort in over a year, and slower than his pole time last year."

The station then went to ten seconds of quotes from Paolo—and ninety seconds from the ninth-place qualifier! I could feel my host's eyes on me. I smiled.

She had seen enough: "So, you are he." We laughed. "What's this ninth-place shit?"

"It beats twenty-fourth, I guess. If no one gets stupid in front of me, I should get some points. Probably."

She gave me a look. "So, then you've got them right where you want them."

"Something like that."

"Pleased to meet ya. Photo for the wall?" I assumed that by next Friday, I'd be up there between Billy Gibbons and Rick Perry.

That beer long since worn off, I found my Hertz and drove to my hotel. I got to where I am in life in large part by being a Courtyard-at-the-airport kinda guy, but I since the race was downtown, I was forced by logistics and media exposure to stay at the JW Marriott. Struggle being real and all. On the plus side, the hotel was in a repurposed office building dating back

to the 1910s, so the architecture and décor was neat and out of the ordinary.

Two queen beds, the other one serving only as a stand for my luggage. One less thing to concern myself with, easier that way.

Eight AM, race day. Wandering out to the balcony, sunlight reflected off the skyscrapers caused me to squint and avert my gaze downward, where a late-model, lightbarred Chevy pickup was cruising blocked-off streets, causing advertising banners laid over concrete barriers to flap slightly. I idly wondered as to what sort of numb-nut would look forward to getting up at the crack of dawn to race around at the road-burning speed of fifty miles an hour at best.

I had inadvertently left the radio on while I was out on the porch; the breathless DJ went on about his half-arsed “Grand Prix Update,” from the “Official Pace Truck” for the event. I wondered to myself what he thought he was going to pace, since Formula One doesn’t use American pick-ups for caution cars, but I figured he knew his job better than I did. At least I now knew who was beating the pickup. I thought about calling his station to inquire whom I had to fuck to hear some country radio in this town, but I figured they just might tell me.

Don Peterson: Raised in Brunswick, Missouri, (Home of the World’s Largest Pecan), and I’m in Houston for the Formula One Grand Prix. Might as well jump into the inevitable background.

Like most of the other drivers, I got into racing originally because it looked interesting. Like the others, I stayed in it because I had some ability. What I share with only a few, however, is a love of the “sport”, as well as a respect for all the responsibilities that go with my position. Formula One is filled with divas, some of them are even drivers (!). In my opinion, spoiled-brat attitudes put the sport in an unfavorable light as far as the fans are concerned. I’m not of the opinion that terms such as “highest-paid drivers”, or a “jet-set lifestyle” are a good enough counterbalance to “asshole recluse” or “toy-throwing spoiled brat.”

The problem with that sentiment is that the fans have less and less to do with the popularity of Formula One. Houston is one example: This race has never come close to selling out in regard to actual paying customers at the ticket booth, not surprising considering that the cheapest bleacher seat goes for two-hundred fifty bucks and allows you a panorama of maybe 150 feet of the course. Depending on the weather, the stands may or may not be full but every ticket’s been sold--courtesy of buyouts by every consumer goods related corporation headquartered in the area. The fact remains that Formula One isn’t the first thing on the mind of the public when it comes to entertainment. Indeed, the Astros had a game that evening, also downtown, and there was no worry about overcrowding or traffic.

So, if there isn’t popular support for a Formula One race in Houston, what’s the deal? If you live in town, take a look at your property tax assessment, for openers. The daisy chain in office got the bright idea that a Grand Prix would make their city appear cosmopolitan and certainly sexier than a balanced budget or doing something about crime. They overstate the economic impact, sell that to a state tourism agency working with baseline budgeting...

This might be the last year for a race in Houston, but not because the circuit sucks

(which it does), nor due to low paid ticket sales (ditto), but due to Phoenix or Moscow or McMurdo Fucking Sound fellating the Formula One governing body a little harder than Houston has. Just like Houston did to Detroit three years ago...

Maybe I'm a dinosaur, but I still feel like giving value for the outrageous salary I'm paid. So, I'll slip on my Sola Stella Capital/Budweiser/Coca-Cola/Shell/Michelin hats, share a handshake and conversation with whoever approaches me, and feel grateful that people are interested in me to the point that they want to meet me. Just because I travel all over and get paid well doesn't make me a better person than the kids who mail me their paintings of my race car, or the guy who worked double-shifts to drive cross-country to see me race.

Or the people who want to sleep with me, either to make some kind of conquest or to find out what "makes me tick." Even though I don't avail myself, I don't have to be a prick about it. Not all groupies are airheads or gold-diggers. I can usually find something to talk about with them, spend some time and leave them with a good feeling, because I have to assume they could be customers of the companies I represent.

I suppose by now you probably want to hear some insight from the driver's seat and ditch the politics and societal observations, I'll try to oblige.

The term "Formula One" is derived from a series of specifications applied to the cars, circuits and race distances--a formula. The term isn't limited to auto racing; hydroplanes, racing airplanes and even bicycles use "Formula One" in their marketing, though the term originated with racing cars in Europe just after the war. Formula One is generally recognized as the most advanced class of motor sport. You'll notice that I didn't say the *best*, NASCAR has a good claim to the closest racing. But using technology and cost yardsticks, Formula One is the highest level.

The cars that Jan Van Bemmelen and I drive, the Hazlett-Ford, uses a chassis consisting of a Kevlar/Nomex sandwich. This material is baked under high pressure, making it strong and resistant to deforming under stress, while at the same time being extremely light. The only metal parts of the chassis are some titanium suspension pieces. With the body panels off (which are for aerodynamic uses and not part of the chassis), the car appears slate-gray, the color of pencil lead. That is appropriate since the material used is carbon—graphite. Diamonds are carbon, too...

Rather than in passenger cars, where the engine fits inside the frame, our Ford motors are part of the chassis, accepting loading just like the chassis and suspension. The chassis construction type is called "monocoque", for "one shell", meaning there aren't subframes for the engine, suspension or gearbox. The suspension is of the four-wheel independent type, no axles, less weight and easier to adjust. The gearbox is a six-speed manual, again part of the chassis; the rear suspension and wing are attached to it.

The motor displaces one-point-five liters, ninety-one cubic inches, a turbocharger on each bank of its V-6 configuration. Out of this little engine (smaller than a bottle of soda) comes at least one thousand horsepower, at least in qualifying where it only has to last a few laps. That is enough to rip asphalt off the street, especially at street circuits where it isn't put down too great to begin with. The motor revs to 11,800 RPM's, about five times more than a passenger car does.

Cosworth Engineering in England makes the motor; they specialize in R & D and small-scale production projects for the automotive industry. Ford bankrolls the engine and provides their own expertise, such as the electronic engine control, commonly known as the “black box”. When our motor is mentioned, it’s referred to as a “Ford-Cosworth” or just “Ford”, and I’m as guilty as anyone of slighting Cosworth. They don’t care, since Ford pays them well.

In relation to the cars at Indianapolis, Formula One cars weigh less (by about three hundred pounds), and are smaller overall. An Indy car will lap the big ovals at about 215, while our fastest circuit in Formula One is around 160. But a Formula One car would lap a given road course faster than an Indy car—but might break before five hundred miles on an oval.

Again, all that exotic construction and high speed doesn’t mean better racing, just better race cars. Expensive, too—our budget for this year is one-hundred million U.S. dollars, besides the drivers’ salaries, Ferrari spends at least twice as much.

As TV was kind enough to point out, much of the news regarding me had been about my ninth-place qualifying effort. Now that qualifying was done, I had resigned myself to staying out of trouble in the race and getting some points, but during yesterday’s qualifying I was trying everything I knew to get more speed out of the car. Houston, like Monaco and an ever-increasing amount of new circuits, doesn’t lend itself to passing. Short straights, ninety-degree corners every 500 feet. Therefore, starting position here means more than at Silverstone or Monza, where there are wide-open spaces and lots of room to pass. Here, if someone wants to keep you behind him, he can probably do it. I’d love to be on pole for every race, but twentieth-fastest time at Silverstone would be better than ninth here.

The performance of our car this weekend has been within the parameters set down by our visits to other slow tracks this year. The Hazlett-Fords hadn’t done well at Melbourne or Monaco, we got second and fourth in Australia, third and fourth at Monaco. We finished one-two at Imola, I won. This is the fourth race of the year, Ferrari ahead of us in race wins, two to one, but they’ve either won or blown up. I’ve got nineteen points, Jan twelve, while both Paolo and Manuel have just the nine from each of their wins.

Teamwork and consistency have seen us through the first quarter of the year. Symbolic of that was the skull session the team had Sunday morning before the final practice. Sunday warm-up is the way to judge how the car will perform during the race; the car you qualify will have different characteristics than the one you race. We bump up the wings a notch or two for increased downforce: You can hold onto a loose car for one or two qualifying laps, but seventy-five with traffic is another story. Our qualifying tires, while stickier than hell, wear out after about two or three laps. And then the engine is tuned differently. Either the electronics are changed to sacrifice some power in exchange for reliability, or even the engine is changed, a bulletproof one put in.

When Jan and I won Imola, the mechanics drained five gallons of gas out of each one of our tanks, and we had lapped the field! That speaks well of our performance on the fast tracks, if we ever get to another one, that is. All the gas mileage in the world isn’t going to help us on this dodgem car track.

Our brain trust Sunday morning consisted of Jan and me, Ken Hazlett, the team owner; Simon Thrasher, the team manager; and Marcel Saint Hilaire, nominally Jan's race engineer but responsible for both cars this weekend. My own engineer, Brian Kernahan, was home in England with his wife and new baby boy.

My performance in practice was within the realm of probability, but Jan's second place was a pleasant surprise. He went out first thing Friday and set his eventual qualifying time, which stood as fastest until late Saturday afternoon. He figured he'd get his run in before the track got oily and the wrecks started, and he wasn't far from wrong. The Ferraris finally got their act together; Paolo put in a lap as the flag flew to knock Jan down. Meanwhile, I did twenty laps in a row on Saturday; my time was consistent throughout the run. Consistently slow, that is.

Therefore, while Jan was figuring out how to pull something over on Paolo and Manuel during the race, I was telling Marcel to give me an extremely high downforce setup. Jan was willing to make a pit stop for tires, that was the conventional wisdom for those up at the front. I had the 'luxury' of bucking that line of thinking, having the corners of my car pinned down would keep the tires from sliding so much on the asphalt and grinding themselves to death. I was hoping to avoid the pit lane—Houston had the most cramped pits on the circuit, and in Formula One there is no limit on how many people over the wall, no restrictions on the presence or number of cameramen or peripatetic pit reporters. It's a wonder that more people haven't been whacked jumping out of the way of accelerating cars.

During the warm-up, I noticed that the track was already getting greasy with oil, rubber and engine coolant. The oil-dry that had been put down made it dangerous to go off-line. In addition, the concrete-to-asphalt junctions were breaking up. While they weren't regulation potholes yet, at 120 it wasn't going to take much for me to be pissing blood after the race. Other holes had been patched already with quick-crete, which made for differences in traction getting out of the corners. Some of the other teams had experienced problems shearing driveshafts the past few days, and that was when the track was new. When the sun got high this afternoon, trying to cut sharply on the surface changes would be like hitting ice.

On full tanks and with a race setup, I got fourth-fastest time. The Ferraris, as expected, had moved up to one-two, Jan third. The most important thing I learned was that I could run the car at that pace all day long, with any luck, maybe I wouldn't be in ninth for long.

Simon and Jan were laughing when I joined them outside our hospitality motorhome. We headed toward the back of the pits, a few people were offering their hands for us to shake, others were shouting encouragement. Someone threw a Cardinal cap down for me to sign, I did so and tossed it back in the general direction of the person, I hoped they got it.

A model-type blonde came up to us, smiling and handing a felt-tip marker to Jan. No words from her, just that smile as she hiked her shorts up to expose her trim, charcoal-tan butt. Jan, who is more comfortable with his bachelorhood than I, readily took the marker and autographed her. Now she spoke, thanking Jan in accented English, then turning to me and asking, "Who are you?"

I smiled, while Simon had a stroke laughing. I turned to Jan, asked how much he had

to pay her to ask me that, “and when did you go back to dating women?”

Jan and I said our goodbyes at the front of the grid, and I made my way back to the fifth row. My car was being lowered off jacks as my tire choice was fitted. A tech from Michelin was noting pressures as he chatted with a man from Ford loading code into the black box. I wriggled into the cockpit, a couple of mechanics did up my six-point belts, then I pulled my firesock and helmet on. The mechanics then attached a strap from each side of my helmet to keep my head upright; connections to my radio; a sound-conducting tube to tell me when the turbo is over-pressuring the pop-off valve; another tube that feeds oxygen to me in the event of a fire; and most importantly, a hose to a bottle of Gatorade. Simon came over and stuck an umbrella into the cockpit, then I took a nap.

Someone who doesn't walk the grid too often will look into my cockpit and do a double take upon seeing me sleeping. Really, I'm not the only driver to do it; we have a few minutes to kill, it beats getting over-analytical and paranoid. Last year, Ken was doing an interview beside the car as I was napping. He told the reporter, “Hell, we just start the car, slap him on his helmet to wake him up, point him to the first corner. Then we get the hell over the pit wall!”

Now, Ken came over to me, plugged his headset into a jack on the side of the car. Simon and I had been discussing one thing or another, but we stopped to hear what wisdom Ken had to impart.

“Don, remember: It's your home race, all your family and friends watching, the television and every sports page in America have their eyes on you, expecting you to win. All of our sponsors are watching,” he motioned up in the general direction of the bank of silver hotels. “Anyhow, just relax, don't put any more pressure on yourself.” I looked to Simon expectantly, a grin starting, and Ken didn't disappoint. “If however, you cock it up, then you're fired. See you in a couple of hours.” I could hear him chuckling through my helmet as he pulled the plug and wandered up the grid, no doubt to tell Jan something similar.

The signal was given to start our formation lap, after which the race would start. I don't want to brag, but I wasn't used to starting this far back. Strange to follow this many cars around, to look at the start light from such a low angle.

I let the car coast to my starting position, selecting first gear as I kept the clutch depressed with my left foot and heel-and-toed the brake and gas with my right. Calmly, I looked for the lights to go out.

The standing start of a Formula One race is made out to be the one moment of drama and danger that most defines the sport. Indeed, a lot of destruction can occur between the start and the first corner, but I don't await the green with a feeling of trepidation. More like I better not fuck this up, or someone behind me won't be paying attention and retire us both.

The best analogy for the first instant of a Grand Prix is to imagine what your computer goes through when you boot it. One moment you're standing still, and in a very short period of time the following things go through your head: Let the clutch out slowly, don't dump it and kill the engine; watch the wheelspin—catch the car as it crabs across the track; wonder if the driveshafts held (you'll find out really soon); first gearshift—did the clutch hold up? Did anyone get a better start than I / did anyone do worse?; Second shift—is anyone around me

trying to win the race at the first corner; dodge the flying car parts if that was indeed the case; third shift and get in line for the first corner, forget about a classic entry, just get around the corner somehow.

Total time elapsed: A little more than ten seconds. I've gone from zero to one hundred and back down to thirty for the first corner. Moreover, I've gone from bouncing along inside a tornado to actually manipulating one.

I couldn't tell, but Jan got Paolo to lead the first lap, Manuel third. I did notice the sixth-place Lotus get on the gas too quick exiting a corner and spin in front of one of the McLarens, causing him to ride over the Lotus' wheel and into the barrier. Depending on the angle, the impact wouldn't necessarily knock either of them out, what was on my mind was that I was up to seventh.

The race settled down for a few laps. Jan stayed in front, he was candid in telling me over the radio that the Ferraris were playing with him, they had all afternoon to get by. The other McLaren had blown; I was in sixth by lap twenty.

Already, the track off-line was getting shitty, balls of rubber ground off tires and flung to the sides of the track. Along with the odd bolt or nut from the many cars that had been on the track today, as the race wore on the surface would be more like driving on gravel. As I had to learn the hard way, when a car I was lapping forgot to check his mirrors and moved over on me. It took a couple of laps to wear the marbles off my tires, but that's life.

Lap twenty-eight, those ahead of me began their planned pit stops. Jan came in first, got back out in sixth, about five seconds behind me. The Ferraris then came in two laps apart, returning just behind Jan. They immediately passed him and started in on me. By now, the other Lotus had taken to the marbles and hit the wall, now I was in second, but everyone behind me had fresh rubber on. Even on my old(er) tires, I was taking time off the Williams in front, the driver was too excited about leading the race and had overused his tires. His gumballs had worn too much; he was losing all the time he had gained without stopping earlier. Pitting now, he'd either burn up a second set trying to catch back up, or languish at the back of the lead lap for the rest of the race. By the way Jan and the Ferraris were catching him, he'd probably be in fifth by the end of the next lap.

And that's exactly what happened. As he entered the last chicane leading onto the pit straight, his tires gave up and he skittered out to the wall. I waited a fraction of a second later than him, cut inside and was a half-length ahead to complete lap forty-five. Manuel, now ahead of Paolo, saw my move and cut even further inside, got me clean going into the first corner. I wasn't under any illusion that Paolo and Jan weren't going to follow, and they did. I heaved the smallest of sighs—I had gone from first to fourth in a matter of a mile. But that was expected, after all, and I was now firmly in the points.

Lap sixty, twenty to go, and I had closed up to about five seconds behind Jan. I had caught him by about a second per lap for the last five, but I wasn't getting excited, my tires weren't exactly fresh. I didn't want to ruin the payoff from the gamble I'd taken, especially since the track was beginning to break up again. I would have been happy if the race had ended at that point; three points were better than what I'd started with.

I wasn't going to get any peace, however. On lap sixty-five, Marcel got on the radio, all

excited, telling me the Ferraris had blistered their front tires.

“Aww, don’t tease me,” I complained. So close to the end of a fruitful day, now there was a legitimate reason to step on it again. Simon laughed and told me Jan had passed Paolo. I asked for the gaps, in response the crew held out a board reading “MAN -0JAN -3PAOLO -3DON”, meaning that Jan was on Manuel’s butt, three seconds ahead of Paolo, who was three ahead of me. The board also indicated there were ten laps left. Okay, then.

On lap seventy-two, I caught Paolo, though he wasn’t just going to wave me by. Even if he were disposed to letting me go on, our tires were in such a state that we were to a large extent just riding in our cars.

So I sold him on an outside move, pulling out on what passed for the back straight, staying outside as the corner approached. We both knew each other well enough that we weren’t going to screw the others race up, it was a matter of who had the most handling left. If I was behind, I’d stay there; if I was ahead, good; but if I was alongside I really should bail because the marbles were waiting. It may have been a two-wide corner first thing on Friday, but not now.

What decided the corner was the state of Paolo’s brakes. His battle with Manuel and Jan had left him with clogged brake ducts and a soft pedal. It was no great leap of logic on my part, but I gave up the outside pass, slotted in behind him going through the corner, then watched as his tires locked up, the brake modulation having gone totally away. I aimed my car to the inside as Paolo grazed the outside wall, bending an endplate on his rear wing. With nine laps left, he’d ride out the damage.

I’d just remembered to take a breath when I was confronted by dust and trash bouncing off my helmet and car. The dust cleared, replaced by Jan’s car sliding backwards along the wall, his right rear corner bouncing along the track, a small fire burning from axle grease.

I was past him too quickly to tell what happened or how he was, but judging by the speed on that part of the track, he’d probably be pissed more than anything. Nevertheless, I got on the radio.

“Jan ate the wall, I guess he’s okay, the car is toast, though,” filling them in as much as I could, unaware if he had called or was able to. I was answered by Jan himself, his call being the last thing he did before unhooking.

“Tire blew. Damn thing was new, too, must have run over something.” By this time I was coming around to the area again, corner workers were waving yellow flags to slow everyone down momentarily. Jan waved as I went past, and parted with “Manuel’s sliding all over the place. He’s all yours, see you on the podium!”

Indeed Manuel was sliding, to the point where I could almost see his nose cone around corners. There were more blistered areas on his tires than there was tread. I thought to myself “Manuel Rittmann doesn’t blister tires,” he’s been the World Champion for the past two years and you don’t get there by ritually abusing your car. Either his team had missed the setup on both of their cars, or they had picked the wrong Michelins—remember, I was on the hard compound, with no worries.

Down to five laps left, I was on Manuel’s rear wing. He was using the entire track,

insisting that I make my own hole. I smiled to myself; at the start, I would have been happy with some points. After my tire strategy was known, fourth would have been just fine. Now first place was just ahead; was I willing to push it?

Oh hell yes.

Two left. A cloud had passed over the track, reducing the temperature slightly. The breeze had picked up, cooling the surface further. It wasn't going to get any better, I thought to myself, let's just see what happens. Manuel was taking a line down the backstretch that avoided most of the manhole covers; nice, sensible just like Manuel. As I pointed my car to the inside, I rationalized my move, figuring Manuel could watch me slide up the escape road if my maneuver didn't work.

My car grounded going over the manholes, sparks flying up from the bump-plates on the bottom of my car, it felt like braking on a washboarded gravel road. I didn't dare to take my eyes off the road to look over at Manuel; I placed my faith in him to note my attempt as I tried my brakes. The marbles made for a rough deceleration, and I had to fight the car as it tried to swap ends. I got on the gas way before the exit of the corner, and I opposite-locked the steering wheel coming out. A look in my mirrors confirmed Manuel hadn't tried to re-pass on the exit, or couldn't. It worked! I allowed myself to think, but only for a second.

"I guess," I called over the radio to my crew as I began the last lap. Once I had passed Manuel, he seemed happy just to get his car home, he had nothing left on the last lap, being well clear of Paolo anyhow. Jan had completed enough laps to get sixth.

That over with, I pulled the car into the parc ferme. The marshals began their perfunctory inspection of the car as I pried myself out of the cockpit. Before Manuel, Paolo or my crew could get over to congratulate me, CBS' pit reporter came over and put his arm around me. He's an old dirt track announcer, and treats every race like Saturday night at the fairgrounds. No one I knew could stand this guy back in sprint cars, and my opinion hadn't changed with the passage of time. He calls me Donny, for chrissakes, and he mispronounces the twenty-three other drivers' names. I let him ad-lib as I took my time unhooking my helmet. More deliberate than usual, I listened to him struggle to fill the air with one catch phrase after another. Finally, I turned to him as someone jammed a Sola Stella hat on my head.

"Well, Donny, that was the best job of biding your time and letting the race come to you that I've seen in Formula One!" he ranted. I choked, wondering which race he'd been watching.

"Thank you very much, though it was as much luck as anything." Even though he was clueless, he had congratulated me, after all.

He hammered at his point: "How did you know your tires were going to go the distance?" The Sola Stella hat left, replaced by Ford.

"I didn't. If it had been a little cooler out today, if Jan hadn't had a puncture, you'd be talking to someone else. If the circumstances had gone just right, I'd have finished tenth. Jan had the race won; Manuel had the race won. Sometimes this happens; I'll take it, but I didn't have this all figured out." Goodbye Ford, hello Coca-Cola.

And still he kept on, causing me to openly chuckle. "So, do you think it was

inexperience that caused the others to burn up their tires?” Jesus, this guy needed help.

“Listen, if I’d done my job yesterday and qualified up front, I’d damn sure have put on sticky tires and pitted with all the others. I had no shot at winning from the fifth row, come on now!”

Coke was gone, along with most of the rest of my hair, replaced by Budweiser. “I’d like to thank the team for giving me such a good car, Ford for the engines. It wasn’t pretty, but it’s nine points.”

Mister CBS tried for a cute summary. “Don, after winning your home race for the second year in a row, does this change your opinion of street races?”

“‘Street race’? Oxymoron!”

Up on the podium, handshakes and the Star-Spangled Banner, followed by the mandatory race winner’s interview (with intelligent questions from the European press), finally an informal debriefing with Simon, Marcel, Ken and Jan. Despite the fact that one of his cars was being backed into the paddock on a rollaway, Ken was a happy guy. We had stolen this one from Ferrari.

Jan had been checked and found healthy, disgusted by coming a few laps short of his first win, but happy that I had won. Along with a Michelin tech, we pulled a piece of rebar out of the carcass of his rear tire.

“I can tell who the street maintenance people had money on.”

Later on, I pointed the rental toward Bush Intergalactic, to prepare for my flight tomorrow morning. A rep from the race organizing committee was there to grab my keys, saving me some daunting logistical gymnastics.

The three-inch-an-hour monsoon outside my window Monday morning was evidence that I was a freaking genius for deciding on the Houston-Bush Marriott. It would have looked stupid to have gotten stuck on a flooded courtesy bus; as it was, I was actually in the airport.

Several text messages had let me know that my Delta flight to Atlanta was at least ninety minutes late, but I headed toward their concourse anyhow. I had nothing else to do in my room and people-watching was more fun than Good Morning America.

I had business with Coca-Cola on Tuesday, they asked me to come a day early and be available for photo ops and handshakes at their headquarters. For what they pay me, I was happy to do so, having done the same for Shell Thursday, touring their refinery and the transloading facility and saying hi and thank you to the workers.

Why fly commercial? (Jan owns and flies his plane, while Manuel fractional-leases his jet.) Well, I like people, like studying interactions and I’m a transportation junkie. I really don’t feel the need to micromanage every second of my life, free time or not, so IAH-ATL on DL was AOK with me.

Suit, tie, dress shirt and slacks, oxfords. Like my daddy had dressed when he was making a sales call, like all professional men did in his day when flying. Good enough for me, and I was heartened anew to see I wasn’t the only one still fighting the sartorial fight. Just another member of the Achiever Class.

A WSJ had been shoved under my door along with my bill, but I’d forgotten to secure a

Houston Chronicle before leaving the hotel. There was a newsstand where the people-mover ended, I followed a lady into the store who knew how to dress. Sensible two-inch heels, could walk in them all day. A couple raindrops on the leather—apparently at least one courtesy van had made it through le deluge.

She was heading in the same direction I wanted to go. Dark gray skirt, pleated, knee-high. Sheer hose. I slid alongside her, reaching for a paper. Didn't go out of my way to, but I looked up and her eyes were on me.

"Read any good books lately?" she grimaced at the cliché even as she spoke it, shook her head slightly.

"You really did just say that," I laughed. She smiled. I looked at the shelves—"Although, to your point, I never buy a book with a colon in the title." That excluded all the hardcovers and half the paperbacks. Even if I agreed with the author's viewpoint, if you have to take two stabs to explain the plot...

"Or watch a television show with an exclamation point in the title," she replied.

"Bingo." I liked her already. I'd already read all the Parkers and Kellermans on offer, so I settled for my Chron. She grabbed one as well, there was a moshpit at the checkstand so I told the cashier I wanted two copies and that got us out of there.

She thanked me. "Grace Hamilton," she held her hand out, I held her hand between my thumb and index like my momma taught me as I told her my name.

"Where ya heading, Grace?"

"Atlanta," Small world, I told her.

There's something about flying out of a fortress hub on another hub's airline—this side of the airport was early-seventies utilitarian, but although United's half had all the bells and whistles, they also had the crowds. The gate areas on this end were quiet enough to talk in a respectable tone of voice.

"Heading back home. Great weekend," she smiled. "How about you? What's in Atlanta?"

"Business. Always business," I replied. "Your weekend?" I prodded as we made it to our gate.

"Aw, just a couple days schmoozing investors. Then Friday night with some friends at the Golden Nugget over in Lake Charles just for giggles, finally back to their condo in Galveston the rest of the weekend."

"What's your preferred method of losing money?"

"Blackjack. Did sorta good, but the people I was with said I left a lot on the table. Don't care," she laughed.

She knew how to talk, animatedly and with the changes in tone and inflection that made me think she had a lot of practice 'schmoozing investors', among other people. I hardly had to hold up my end, and I was more than a little interested to hear what popped into her head next.

But that had to wait, as one of the gate agents came up to us: "This rain meant that a lot of our erstwhile customers are erstwhiling out on Beltway 8, First Class is wide open...I'm authorized to listen to offers!"

Grace spoke up with no hesitation: “I got a hundred dolores that says you can squeeze me and Don up front.”

“Done and done.” The agent took her credit card and our boarding passes and scurried off. Grace looked at me, shrugged. “Sorta good at blackjack!”

When I’m crossing an ocean, I’ll spring for First, but I see no need on a ninety-minute flight. Although about half the time I get upgraded in any case. Since the plane looked to be going out about sixty percent full, my surmise was that I’d have been moved to First anyhow. But I couldn’t have guaranteed Grace would, so I was glad that she was so proactive. It wasn’t my money and Grace wanted to wave hers around. It’d be rude to say no...

New boarding passes arrived, in fact we were motioned up to the check-in area. The flight attendant took our drink order, (Grace: “I hope you got some mimosas with our names on them!”)

“Mind if I get the window?” she asked, I nodded.

“Don’t be surprised if I lean over during takeoff and landing,” I mentioned.

“I’d do the same if *I* were on the aisle,” she replied. Sliding in, she lifted the armrest with an economy of effort, patting my seat, smiling in anticipation of...something...

That’s where she wants me, I thought as my breath caught for about an eighth of a second. An abundance of self-assuredness on her part, but I just knew it was also a small opportunity for her to go out on somewhat of a ledge.

It took another eighth of a second to decide that I didn’t want her to fail. We both quickly settled in, looked at each other—and sighed!

A brace of mimosas arrived and were found delicious. I’d been drinking a lot of champagne this weekend...

“Antioxidants, Vitamin C and a dash of fiber. God’s breakfast!” We were taxiing out and the flight attendants were seated so she nursed her drink. The tires were throwing up so much water that we couldn’t see the takeoff worth a damn, and a thousand-foot ceiling put an end to the scenery for a while.

“OK, Grace—I love to hear you talk.” She smiled, and maybe blushed. “Tell me about your business that you mentioned earlier. As much as the SEC will allow...”

“No stock, just partners,” she began. She was the CEO of a chain of ‘glamour photography’ studios, she had one unit in the Galleria, one in The Woodlands and one in the Texas City outlet mall. “Where neglected housewives get themselves duded up and photographed so they can impress their boyfriends with how good they can look.

Vanity is an important motivating tool,” she smirked, “almost as good as guilt. I get a lot of husbands buying wifey Christmas and anniversary gifts.” She showed me an advert in the Delta Sky magazine; locations in Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas and Houston, among others. Those ads aren’t cheap, I thought.

But apparently they worked: “Some people in Houston did an over-the-transom proposal to buy in, my little boutique is going to get big!” She sang the last word, draining her glass.

“Just one more,” she said as the cabin crew started their rounds. “Lest you get the wrong idea about me.

“So, what do you do for a dollar, Don Peterson?” she asked, leaning back and turning in her seat toward me.

Here we go. “I drive race cars,” I replied.

I awaited her response, expecting anything from “Bullshit” to condescension to polite silence for the rest of the flight.

She surprised me: “Let’s see your drivers license.”

That I could do, I told her, reaching into my vest pocket and pulling out my wallet. Though I have a license from Missouri and another from England, I knew which one she wanted to see. “This is an FIA competition license, endorsed for Formula One participation. Cost me ten thousand bucks.” Two hundred dollars for each point I earned last year, nice little kickback for the FIA.

“That race downtown! Ding. Makes sense. How come the license is in French?”

“The kleptocrats who run the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile think their actions are more evenhanded and nonpartisan if they couch them in French, the international language of diplomacy and all that crap.”

She thought that over for a second, indicated that she understood my reasoning. Then she dropped her next question. “How good are you?”

She really doesn’t have any idea, I thought. Again, there was no reason to expect her to, my name isn’t Jeff, Mario or A.J. She had put me in a position where either I blew my own horn or appeared to be evasive toward answering. That didn’t bother me, I admired her style.

I opened the Chron up. I was on the front page. There was an overly dramatic picture of me driving over one of those manhole covers, making the pass on Manuel as sparks flew out behind the car. Below the fold was a shot of me on the podium that removed any doubt as to who was sitting next to her, but she was already into the story.

The article was typical uninformed half-assedness: Barely into the season and I “had the championship wrapped up.” God. More flowery verbiage followed; “thousand-horsepower steed” and “cool and calm at two-hundred miles an hour” (at Houston?), that was just the first paragraph. Page two got worse, Grace chuckled over “bachelor playboy”, especially.

She switched to the WSJ; page five had Ford’s full-page ad crowing about my win. Page six, Budweiser; seven, Michelin. If she has begun our conversation in hopes of killing an hour and a half flirting harmlessly, by now she knew she had bitten off more than an econ professor or a bank branch auditor.

How she comported herself during the rest of the flight would be interesting—I saw no ring on her left hand, not even a hint of a tan line. She let out a breath, laughed “Well...” We arched our eyebrows at each other. Her mouth was open slightly now, her tongue subconsciously moving slowly across her teeth. Her left leg moved further up into the seat as she turned more directly to me, a glimpse of smooth, substantial thighs. Perfectly proportioned. She looked like a still life; an ad in a catalog.

She seemed airbrushed, nothing out of place. And I was aware that I was taking shallow breaths, afraid that she would revert to that two-dimensional advertisement if I as much as sighed hard.

Her reading glasses were off, the earpiece drawing circles on her tongue as she listened to me talk. That along with the fact that she had managed to get me talking about myself led me to believe that she had found her feet regarding what I did and what that represented. I was relieved on two levels, one being that she was as well spoken as she was attractive; more important, she gave no impression she was overly impressed.

But as we climbed above the stratus into a brilliant sun over a blanket of cotton, as I leaned over to the window, instead of moving to the right with me, she stayed in her seat only leaning back slightly. She felt fantastic and she knew I knew. Curves, warmth and great cologne. Damn.

It'd been a while but I knew how to act. Just smile, look her in the eye and not say a word.

The clouds thinned as we flew east, by Atlanta's western edge it was severe clear. The landing pattern was east-to-west which meant the downwind leg passed north of downtown. Grace grabbed my hand as the skyscrapers came into view. Subconsciously, I assumed, and I was right: "Home!" She didn't move her hand in any great hurry, though.

Even though I fly in and out of here five or so times a year, in my heart I knew if I didn't move in some direction right now, I'd never see her again. And I sensed she was expecting it—after her mildly assertive and charming behavior back at IAH, I think she wanted some sort of reciprocation. Both good businessmen and high-priced race drivers know when opportunity is knocking, and a woodpecker was tapping on my skull.

The plane had stopped; the jetway pulled up to the door. Soon we wouldn't have each other as a captive audience, she'd go one way, and I...

What the heck—"Grace, I'd be a complete idiot if I didn't ask you to dinner while I was still in town. In years to come, I would view my life unfavorably if we never talked again. I hope you'll let me take you out for dinner?"

She laughed at my choice of words, but I could see the relief on her face that I had asked. "Well, you owe me for the seat upgrade, after all." I smiled. We did our negotiations while waiting for our bags. "Where are you staying?"

"Residence Inn, just north of downtown."

"Near Georgia Tech. I know the joint. Seven?"

"Deal. There's my car," I pointed toward a black Chrysler 300, gently stretched, with the inevitable "Peterson" placard on the roof. "How you getting into town?"

She motioned to a similar car with a similar sign. "I know it was just two drinks, but why push it? And," she looked at me sideways while batting her eyes, "I did reasonably well at Blackjack, dontcha know!"

On that happy note, I was whisked off to Coca-Cola, shaking hands, photobombing employees' selfies, and saying all the right things to their in-house media department as well as the TV crews that had wandered by. A Hazlett-Ford was set up in the atrium, and a lot of people had brought their kids in for the half-day to play on it, gently.

Today was nothing but pleasure, with the promise of extreme business tomorrow, the same limo dropped me off at the hotel about five-thirty. Don's going on a date, I sang to myself. I had given Grace my business card that morning—the 'weekend job' one, gray on

black, Helvetica Neue Bold—Don Peterson Professional Automobile Driver. On which I had scribbled my cellphone number which resulted in a text from her as I opened my door.

“Dress casual. Not like this morning, lol.”

I laughed as I “KK”-d back. I had sent most of my luggage back to London on the plane that Formula One had chartered, leaving me with two days of dress clothes, one of which I had turned in to get dry-cleaned. All I had left for tonight was one set of khakis and that Redneck Country Club long-sleeve shirt, I hoped that the restaurant’s air conditioning worked.

Seven O’clock dead, another text: “*Porte-cochère <3*”. North Georgia’s slowest elevator. Khakis of her own—capris to be exact. Birkies. Pedi. No stockings. Coral-colored solid sleeveless top fighting the good fight against all those glorious curves. Or maybe allied with them...

Late-model, mid-level Honda Accord, freshly detailed. Vanilla little tree freshener and no hint of smoke; I mentally fist-pumped. We chatted like we’d known each other for years as she pointed the car north on 75, swinging off at the Paces Ferry exit—and right into a Steak ‘n Shake.

I looked at her in a new light, although I wasn’t done with the old one, to be honest. How could she know? “Are you the cousin from Missouri I didn’t know I had?”

“Doubt it,” she smirked. “Carol, my CFO and her hubby love this place but I’ve never been.”

“You are going to have your mind blown.” I shook my head wryly. “A Steak ‘n Shake in fucking Buckhead!”

“-Ish.”

When my dad was growing up in St. Louis, before McDonald’s and the other chains got going, you either were a Steak ‘n Shake man or you favored White Castles. In my family, White Ghastly onion-burgers were regarded as chemical-biological warfare experiments. A store of theirs was the safest area in any neighborhood—no thug could ever stand the smell. After Dad had moved to Brunswick, our family would think nothing of piling in the car and driving to Columbia just to eat at Steak ‘n Shake. Now the chain was looking to cash in on the boom times in Atlanta.

Dinner took two hours, as I got her to talk about her business some more. Just out of hairstyling school about five years ago, Grace answered an advertisement for a beautician at a suburban photography studio. It was a family-owned operation, specializing in formal portraits, the usual graduation and prom pictures. The photography classes she had taken in high school helped, as well as her sense of taste regarding makeup. Being a small business, Grace got her nose in all aspects of the business, before long, she was doing the books, handling the advertising.

She knew where to find business during the slow period after Christmas and before engagements were announced, and kept her eyes open for a way to diversify the business. Occasionally she had clients, women, who wanted the pictures for gifts for their boyfriends or even themselves. Grace understood quickly what these people wanted from their pictures, a melange of fantasy, imagination, and sexuality. As she got better at the marketing of this

expression of self-esteem, her reputation grew. She began to wonder if there was a market for this type of photography as merchandise, to be sold as a gift or impulse item.

“Just so happened that the mall in Union City had opened in the middle of a recession,” she continued the story. “The mall management made me a smokin’ deal on a corner, though it still took all of my money for the fixtures and equipment.” Her idea began to work, a television station did a piece that fall about the “hot new personal service”, the *Journal-Constitution* had her business listed as one of the top ten holiday gifts that season.

The company that managed the mall wanted her to fill space in another shopping center of theirs; another deal. Once Christmas was done, along came Valentines’ Day, then Mothers’ Day and so on. She began to delegate the day-to-day, recruited management, spent most of her time on expanding and long-term planning. Within two years, every mall of note in town had one of her studios.

“I wasn’t the only person with the same general idea, but it seems now like I was doing the best job of it,” she said modestly. “Bought out a studio in Savannah, put another one in Nashville, then Knoxville.” She pulled up a YouTube video of one of her Atlanta-market commercials. “Grace, Limited”, the caption read, as an announcer intoned “Phipps Plaza, Atlantic Station,” probably more, but the audio was drowned out.

“‘Grace’,” I smiled.

“What else?” she replied breezily. “It flows. I could make it ‘Your Wife in a Bustier and Fuck-Me Red Lipstick’, but that’d be hell for signage.”

She returned to her story: “I was afraid that I’d either be sighing to myself in an office, or else continually on the road, but so far, so good. I’m on the road eight to ten days a month, and that’s enough to keep it interesting, not jaded at all.”

We both had busy days tomorrow, today being very productive, rewarding and exhausting in a way. In the parking lot, an interesting data-point made itself known: Her in her Birkies and me in moccasins, I was staring straight at her nose. Damn fine nose, full of character but there was a five-inch difference in height. “Well, this is interesting,” she mused. “Happens a lot,” I assured her. “In fact, being five-seven is a benefit in my line of work. If I were six-six I wouldn’t be driving a formula car—bad aero.”

Back into downtown. She pointed off toward a junior skyscraper off to the right —“that’s one of the buildings of Atlantic Station, multi-use community, my condo is in there. Gentrification, tax abatement, yaddayadda. One of my studios is there, too—walk to work, bring the dog. Next trip back, I’ll show you my place.”

I smiled, and this time I squeezed *her* hand. Lightning.

She suggested that I save the car fare and allow her to drive me to Hartsfield tomorrow night, I agreed. Back at the hotel driveway, she jumped out of her seat and came across the front of her car and met me at my door. Five-second friendly kiss and an appropriately close hug, then she zoomed off.

I sat on a bench next to the doorway for a minute, taking in the highrise condo down the street, lit up with blue-green LEDs top to bottom. Lady’s got some skills, I thought. While sitting, I used my tablet to watch Grace, Limited’s YouTube channel, paying more attention to her commercials now that it was quieter. She appeared in most of them; perfect

makeup, porcelain skin, her hair up, down, curly, using Henry Ford's admonishment in terms of her hair color—any color as long as it was black...silk blouses in all the ads, no cleavage but proudly showing off the arms of a woman, not a girl.

And a Southern-by-God accent! She hadn't affected that when talking to me—I watched the commercials over and over just to hear her. While on the tablet, I also noticed a new subscriber to my Facebook page. Stalking works both ways, I smiled to myself. I'd have done the same to her pages but I had to rest in order to make some money tomorrow...

Coca-Cola is one company that is uniquely associated with the United States, and with the visibility I have being an American race driver in Europe, we have done each other some good. Some months ago, the bottling franchise for northern Missouri came up for sale and the same people I had worn sponsor patches for remembered me. My lawyer, Max Anschutz, had flown in earlier that morning, and with a couple of signatures, I was in the soft drink distribution business for damn little out-of-pocket.

"It doesn't say much for the state, but you're now the richest person between Columbia and Des Moines," Max mentioned. "Speaking as your attorney, I can say I'm ten percent as rich as the richest man in northern Missouri. How do you raise hell in this town? My treat."

I told him of the itinerary I had lined up for that evening, Max chuckled.

"You race drivers. Have to beat the women off with a baseball bat." For all his wishful thinking about the businessman's special at the Cheetah Club, he admitted he was on the next plane back home.

After the ink had dried, I had interviews with Bloomberg and CNBC, then I tended to my duties to the racing press by doing phone calls until three o'clock. Max may have overstated my relative wealth, but the fact remained that this was the first investment I'd made outside of the family businesses. Felt good, felt nervous.

And now her Accord pulled up. The jolt I felt reminded me of being a school kid on Labor Day weekend; though I liked what I was going back to, there was so much I was leaving behind! To that end, although I felt no small measure of regret, the idea of being five minutes late to board my flight was a little disconcerting, but I didn't want Grace to kill us both getting to the airport...

Grace hopped out, opening the back door and I threw my bag in. White sheer blouse, cami-top, finally a hint of cleavage. Holy cow, I thought. She acted as if I had spoke aloud, ear-to-ear smile and scrunching her shoulders before giving me a quick peck on the cheek before aiming toward 75/85.

"Thank you for driving me, Grace, I don't care how much you drive around town, it ain't easy."

"Pfft," she looked at me as if I'd said something funny, but I was dead serious. It might cause a laugh back in England if I got a speeding ticket, but I was more worried about fucking up in rush hour in an unfamiliar town and killing someone. At that second, I was in no position to assume I could overcome any obstacle on the Interstate.

"On a track, I'm with about twenty-five other drivers who have a pretty good idea what they're doing, they aren't drunk or fighting with their spouses or on their cell. Plus, we're all

going in the same direction. And I'm in a car I'm used to."

Twenty-five miles an hour didn't present her a challenge, we had only about five minutes worth of cruising at the posted, south of Lakewood, before it was time to turn into Hartsfield.

"So, where to?" "Delta again. Saint Louis, going back home for a couple days."

"Hm. And you *are* coming back? I don't want to clean my house for nothing," she laughed.

"Cross my heart," but I'd really like to cross hers... "But I'll give you enough warning." She squeezed my hand again.

Parked at the curb. "Ready to do this quick?" Not really, I said but I was talking to her back.

Bag checked and whisked away. It was time. My hands found their way behind her, she took a step closer, our thighs entwined as she caught my gaze with hers.

The breeze caught her perfume, jet fuel mixing with Ambush, causing me to involuntarily breathe deeper, and bringing her breasts into contact with me. I abandoned all restraint then, my lips meeting hers, followed closely by her tongue.

Ah, well, I thought as we finally pulled apart. "Don, I'm afraid you're going to find me irresistible," she said without a trace of arrogance, like she had already determined what was going to happen. Without a chance for me to respond with something eloquent, she took a step back and turned toward her car door.

As I called a florist from the gate area, I thought to myself that these business trips were getting more interesting.

Ninety minutes to Lambert, although any trip that traverses the Mason-Dixon covers a distance that can't be measured in miles or time. MadDog-80, economy this time, rental car, then I-70 toward home. Nodding to Dave Ramsey's wisdom on the radio.

Getting back to the synergies with Coca-Cola, I had tried in the past to get Hertz interested in sponsoring me—international service provider, road warrior demographic, et cetera—but since at the moment Hertz *wasn't* owned by Ford, no dice. Ford did tell me that they would like to see me in Blue Oval cars, as long as I sent them an invoice that showed this then I'd get a check in a timely manner. Okay, then.

Which tonight meant a Ford Escape, at least it had speed control. I-70 to US-63, then US-24. It was about eight when I arrived home. I was born and raised in Brunswick, about eighty miles east of Kansas City, where US-24, the Grand River, and the Norfolk Southern Railway scoot up to one another. It's a farm town of about one thousand, other industries being a couple of elevators and a rail-to-barge grain loader. I pulled the car into the Shell station on the corner of Wabash and Main. This is the family business, a strip mall that consists of the Pump 'n Run, Peterson Farm and Auto Parts, as well as a few other establishments. Across the highway, where the railroad depot used to be, is our self-serve car wash.

Setting the nozzle in my tank, I waved to the cashier and walked to the parts store. Dad had found a reason to be at the store late, he said hello and walked toward my car with a rag and a bottle of Rain-X; his habit every time I've returned home. I smiled wryly—it's a

rental, dad.

I pulled up a stool and shot the shit with those in attendance, discussing the wild life of a small businessman who just happens to make disgusting amounts of money at his job. Mounted on the walls were reminders of a life that had been richly lived and thoroughly enjoyed: Trophies from races from Moberly to Monza, photographs of me in cars ranging from pounded-out Crown Vics to this year's Hazlett-Ford, newspaper clippings from the Chariton County Journal, to the Financial Times and USA Today. It had taken me a long time for me to be comfortable with whatever fame I had accumulated, but it had taken far less for Dad to reflect his pride in my achievements.

I told dad I'd see him and mom tomorrow, and drove up the hill to my sister's house. Technically the "old homestead", it's the house Marie and I grew up in before the folks moved out to acreage west of town. With John, her hubby, and their two kids, it was just as noisy as when we were growing up. It's an old house, but I had it totally gutted and remodeled four years ago. I keep a couple rooms for an office and bedroom, but there is still a lot of room left over.

The back of the lot abuts onto farmland, this year planted to corn. Out of which emerged Theresa and Daniel, my niece and nephew. Theresa turned eight last month, Daniel is six. They wrestled me to the ground, and then we pulled the corn borers off each other and went into the house to see what was left over from dinner. Sis pecked me as I climbed the back porch. Like our mother, she has light brown hair, with farmer freckles and a wiry figure from chasing two kids around.

Daniel showed me a model of this year's Hazlett-Ford, I had shipped it back from England last month and he was mostly done with it. Theresa asked me whether I'd met Matthew Bellamy yet. I'm grateful that they don't have to relate months of their lives to me each time I visit, that I'm not a "long-lost" relative.

Marie nestled sisterly in my arm as we swung and watched her cat jump around in the flowerbeds. Growing up and in school, we beat up and generally terrorized each other, but let someone else lay a hand on her little brother...Ultimately we went into business together, with hard work making us closer than just brother and sister. Silently, we had been working toward our parents' financial security, now we could look at the chain of stores with satisfaction that we had done well. Toward that goal, we saw eye-to-eye on so many aspects of the operation, and showed such enthusiasm for the business that many people who met us were amazed we were related—we both had the personalities of Alpha children, at least around the stores. The fact that she's a head taller than me and her sandy hair contrasts with what's left of mine heightens the amazement of casual acquaintances.

"So, brother," she changed the subject, sort of. "You seeing anyone lately?"

"Ahh, hell. You know I don't have time to invest in that," I mumbled, looking off in the distance. I'd note the seeming coincidence, except she brings this up every time I'm home. I'd expect no less. "You really think there are women waiting around their phones hoping I'll get bored or horny? The sad truth is, no one has time to get involved."

I reached for my drink. "Besides, I'm a polygamist already. I've got my drive, the business, my matchmaker sister..."

She ignored that—"I don't hear you complaining."

"God, no. This is what I had always hoped for, being consumed in my life, not just cruising along."

"You better watch out, or you'll look up and notice you're an old man," Marie cautioned, with a view to starting an argument.

"Fuck off," I laughed. "I'm not as selfish or narrow-minded as you assume: I'll slow down someday and let some girl make me a responsible member of society or something."

"Someday," she repeated, smiling. It wasn't as if she had stamped any of my previous relationships with her seal of approval, so I took her fretting with a block of salt. But I've got a secret, and I'm going to keep it that way...

When I bankrolled the restoration of the house, I resisted the temptation to furnish my rooms like a hotel suite, though I made sure the plumbing and electrical work was up to institutional standards; I like long, hot showers, and I have all sorts of PAL videotape stuff from Europe that needs special outlets. Although Marie was no interior decorator, she volunteered/insisted to work on my room, like I had a choice all the way from Europe. Knowing her brother like she did, aided by a blank check, my rooms turned out just fine. She installed a bay window looking out onto her vegetable garden, blond-wood carpentry and matching parquet flooring, the place turned out to be bright and airy, by no means a hermitage.

I leaned back in my recliner. Shit, forty-eight-ish hours ago, I was winning that race, all the noise and pressure, the satisfaction and accomplishment. I was as far removed from that particular lifestyle as I could be presently. I would have smiled and appreciated the contrast, of only I hadn't done so a hundred times already in the past few years. This is my life; I can't honestly break it down into segments. It was a good thing I was happy with it, because I couldn't see it winding down or changing dramatically anytime soon.

After a few hours Wednesday morning returning calls and poking around town, it was time for dinner. John's tractor-trailer was already in the folks' driveway as Marie's Ford Edge brought us over. Even if I only show up once a year, Mom wasn't the type to slave over a state dinner; a raft of Pizza Hut boxes from the restaurant in Marshall sat on the kitchen table. Baseball had the evening off, nothing on the radio, so we passed time on the porch, watching the kids playing in the bean field and checking the progress of a rain shower trying to get going south of town.

Dad settled down with a slab of pizza. "Well, I guess this month's board meeting will come to order," as we all laughed, beginning to relate, discuss and argue about what was happening with the company.

Besides the mall and wash in town, we had convenience stores along 24 in Carrollton and two in Moberly, on 36 in Cameron and Chillicothe, also in Sedalia and Marshall. Others were abuilding along I-29 and I-70, hopefully to be finished by Labor Day. John had finalized the purchase of a fuel hauler in Sugar Creek and merging it with our own distribution company (that truck out front).

The others were more conversant in the day-to-day than I was; I'd passed two new stores on the way home, and I had heard our first radio ad on the drive from Moberly. So

when Marie would mention the name of a general manager from Bud, or when the Shell rep from St. Louis came up in conversation, I knew who they were, but my first thoughts would be “I played ball with his kid” or “how’s her husband doing?” rather than anything directly related with the company. It hadn’t happened yet, but the day was coming when I wouldn’t recognize the people who had helped us get started and whom the folks talked to every day. I mentioned to the table that “I ought to get more involved,” but I immediately remembered that I had said the same thing last year. Marie reached over to touch my hand, to be honest, from the point of view of the corporation, I wasn’t missed. Much.

The company had borrowed money from my salary to finance the first round of new stores, a whole lot quicker and friendlier than going to a bank or trying to float an IPO. I lent it interest-free, of course, whether the rest of the family expected me to do so was beside the point. Cash flow being what it was in the gas business, my initial loan had been paid back and re-loaned several times. Sola Stella’s coffers had replaced my checking account some time ago. The folks naturally were grateful for my participation, but sometimes I felt as if they had to “report” to me. At the same time, there was no way I was contributing the time I felt was necessary to the company.

The kids couldn’t have cared less about whatever funk I was in, as they came running up the driveway to get their uncle. “Don, the train signals changed, looks like a westbound’s coming. Wanna check it out?”

“Don’t see why not,” I replied, getting up. “Go on,” I told them. “I’ll meet you down there.” Running like the kids is one thing I can’t do anymore, so I walked briskly down to trackside as a locomotive horn sounded for the grade crossings back in town.

There was no hurry, however, as the train slowed to a halt near the end of the folks’ driveway. Just to the west, the double-track goes down to one; apparently this westbound was waiting for a meet. The stopped train was a local, hitting all the sidings from Moberly to North Kansas City.

Theresa and I wandered back along the train, she read the names off the boxcars. “Southern, Norfolk and Western, Santa Fe, Cotton Belt...” I first learned about geography from reading the sides of cars at crossings, now it was Theresa’s turn, only there were fewer railroads!

Another horn caught our attention and moved us into the weeds adjoining the tracks. The expected eastbound appeared and blew past. Theresa and I waved at the front end, then collected Daniel and returned to the house. The kids were whispering conspiratorially, though I wasn’t able to make out their conversation over the accelerating local. I didn’t think it pertained to me in the first place, and I had other things on my mind.

Marie met me at the garage, a shit-eating grin on her face. “Good thing that train arrived when it did,” she chuckled as she led me onto the patio. Everyone yelled “Happy Birthday”, thirty candles on the cake attracting suicidal moths.

“Thanks for reminding me,” I grumbled for effect, though I was indeed grateful for the thought and effort. Actually my birthday was last month, things were easier to arrange now.

“You like?” Marie motioned to the cake. It was my favorite, marble cake with deadly lard icing. But I could tell I wasn’t going to see much of it...

Two hours later as I climbed into bed, I thought about how my family has a way of cutting off any incipient depression or feelings of inadequacy I might have dredged up. Thirty? I snorted—still chasing trains and sleeping in my old house.

Montréal:

It's a common joke on British TV talkshows and among motorsport writers that if I were the subject of a tax investigation, I'd be thanking the IRS for my great audit or slipping an HM Revenue and Customs gimme cap on while facing the camera. Just like most jokes, it's an exaggeration, but I happily own the premise.

I'm glad that I wasn't racing in the late 70s with soft-core magazine and condom sponsors, also happy that I just missed the age of tobacco sponsorship. I've never had to accept a sponsorship for a product or company that I absolutely detested, and was pleased to no end to get backing from companies like Shell, Michelin and Ford whose products I used. So, it was easy to be an advocate for them, and if someone wants to judge my enthusiasm as shilling, they're wrong and I'm going to keep it up.

I did manage to bring Sola Stella in, but I'm still bugged by the instances where I failed to make the case for other companies to involve themselves in Ken's team. I mentioned Hertz already, but Marriott and Delta were two others that I patronize and was absolutely sure I could represent well. But out of force of habit, I still get into granular detail about where I travel, how I got there, where I stayed, where I ate, in what I invest, et cetera. In other words, shilling products that I don't get paid for, I know I'm doing it and I still shake my head at it. Just part of my charm, I guess...

In that vein, American this time, St. Louis to Heathrow via Chicago. (British Airways, actually—thank you, codesharing. Wonder if that was my last 747 trip...)

I like Chicago, if by Chicago you mean O'Hare. Get off one plane, get on another, no drama. But I've yet to make my peace with the burg itself. Dad is from St. Louis, and I share the view of him, his friends and family that either you were a St. Louis person or a Chicago one—you couldn't be both. Nevermind the diminished cachet of St. Louis these days and the insurmountable economic advantages Chicago enjoys, no one I knew has ever bandwagoned and started wearing Cubs gear, for example. But you can't fly nonstop to Europe from STL anymore. Life is full of compromises.

F1's original calendar had us leaving Houston to go to México City, then Montréal—a nice little clutch of flyaway races bunched together to save transport costs and time zone changes. All well and good until the FIA decided that the swamp that passed for the México racetrack was too dangerous and no amount of kickbacks could fix things. (The cynics amongst us were convinced that the sanctioning fee wasn't forthcoming...) Lawsuits and lost escrow deposits, but the hard truth was that we'd fly our roadshow back to London and then back across the Atlantic, with one week gap in the middle, so of course all the race teams went back to the shops and spent the money they had expected to save.

The same thing had happened to Montréal last year when the Quebec government decided it had other things to spend tax receipts on and the race had been canceled. Only the intervention of the new federal government's cultural minister (yep, 'cultural') together with Molson's brewery had put Montréal on the calendar again. Plus ça change...

I like money as much as the next capitalist running dog, but sooner or later F1's ruthless pursuit of just one more Euro will come to bite it in the ass. It's susceptible to the ol'

economic sine-wave as any other endeavor—oil embargoes, recessions, central currency implosions. The 70s saw the Seven Sisters oil giants bail, replaced in short order by tobacco. At one time, seventy-five percent of the grid had ‘butt money’ paint, *then* the EU banned tobacco advertising.

On a slightly smaller stage, the hundreds of millions in race sanctioning fees are not only straining local and federal budgets of democracies and of public companies, but even totalitarian governments and state-run monopolies are starting to feel the pinch. Meanwhile, the Gulf states are waving money at the FIA and they won’t hold out for long. It’s easy to imagine that one day half the Grands Prix will be run outside of Europe.

On the team level, it isn’t as bad. Since this includes driver salaries, I’m a happy boy for now. Consumer goods companies in more mainstream categories have taken over for the most part from tobacco. Computers, entertainment media, drinks both alcoholic and non-, and most importantly, automobile manufacturers.

American—*British Airways*—deposited me at Heathrow around eight Thursday morning, I caught a ride to Hazlett’s with the editor-in-chief of Autosport, one of the leading enthusiast magazines in England. This was another way of killing two birds, they got a story, I got home.

Ken’s shop is located just outside of the perimeter fence of Heathrow, the roar of jets taking off met us as we climbed out of the car. We took to the loading dock, squeezing past one of the transporters being loaded for the trip to Canada. I was surprised to find Jan inside the shop, he had just returned from a quick visit to Amsterdam. He was showing his Houston wreck to a retinue of his favored journalists.

The car had been thoroughly vetted by our mechanics, in case there was anything that didn’t need to be seen by spies. It ain’t like our cars are Stealth bombers, Simon can arrange for pictures, when the season is over we’ll let anyone who asks climb all over the cars. But during the year, we’ll only let in whom we know, then only show them what we think is common knowledge to the other teams. Any other constructor runs things the same way, the media knows this, accepts it, then runs nine months’ of guesses, educated and otherwise.

Jan was keeping the writers happy in giving his impressions of the race, so I excused myself and went to talk with the mechanics. When we win races, you’ll see the crew in the pits giving each other high-fives and handshakes, but you never see the people who actually design and machine the raw materials. It is fairly anonymous work, but both Jan and I insist on our shop staff getting recognized for their efforts. Of course, the best way I can thank my guys is to bring my car home in one piece, so all they have to do is wax it!

I was talking with the guys, propping up a counter as we discussed the issues of the day, namely the latest “Page-Three” bimbos. Tabloids over here have a topless girl on the third page, giving the commuters on the morning train something to look at. One of the mechanics tossed the Sun aside, when I caught something and snagged it out of midair.

“The last time I saw this ‘un, she was getting Jan’s autograph!” I exclaimed. “About here,” I pointed out, indicating her rump.

“Wonder if she got ICI to sponsor her surgery,” one of the guys mused. We looked closer, indeed we could see the scars from her boob job. “Not only do the British build the

best race cars, but we're on the cutting edge of implant technology!"

One of the women from the office walked by, we made no attempt to hide the rag. She typically took no offense, studied the picture over my shoulder, we awaited her verdict.

"Piker," she decided. "How much is self-respect going for these days?"

"Why don't we ask Jan," I replied, knowing damn well he didn't know how she earned her keep. Or maybe he did—he might have no problem with trafficking in trollops, but the next time I saw this girl, the caption would read along the lines of "frequent companion of dashing F1 superstar Jan Van Bemmelen".

"Oh, hell, that'd just piss his other girlfriends off," the other guys concluded. "The peace and quiet of motor racing, when compared to domestic violence!"

"What's this, then?" Jan snatched the paper out of my hands. We noticed a tic cross his face as the memory of those life preservers played in his mind. I looked at the ceiling, waiting for the explosion.

"Christ, I'll have you know, this young lady is only modeling to support her mum's methadone program." We broke up, while Jan ran back toward his guests, waving the paper at them. "Right, take a look at my new fiancée!"

I heard my name called from across the floor and was happy to see my engineer, Brian, with his wife and new baby. We repaired to his office, where Sally handed Brian Peter Kernahan to me. He didn't seem to mind, burping as soon as I laid him on my shoulder.

Their daughter, Elizabeth, was now in Marcel's office, the one with a view of the runway. She was my first baby-sitting job upon arriving at Hazlett's, succeeded in getting her potty-trained, too. She can tell an A319 apart from a B737-700 already.

"Don, when is it going to be your turn?" Sally teased.

"When do your stitches come out?" I shot back.

Brian had no objections, wandering on down the hall to find Marcel, keeping up to date with the cars. Liz brought me up to date on her responsibilities as a big sister, "Once his belly button fell off, Mum let me do his diapers," she reported. She had kept it, it was in her pocket now, did I want a look?

I took that as a sign to run like hell, so down the hall Junior and I went. A look in Simon's office told me that he was already on his way to Montréal, getting things lined up for the race. Sanjay, our designer, was in, however.

Sanjay is from Delhi, India, not exactly a cradle of modern automobile design (yet). He arrived in England armed with a degree in Mechanical Engineering, added one in Aeronautical Engineering from the University of East Anglia, which did him a lot of good considering the state of British aerospace at the time. It made him an asset of some value in auto racing, most of the top designers in Formula One today have similar backgrounds. He has been doing this for ten years and is regarded as the best in his field. I'm certainly impressed with his command of all the Finite Element Double Secret stuff, but not to the point that I want to spend the time to understand it.

He has a sixteen-year-old boy, who was moving up from Karts to Formula Ford. You couldn't keep Denis from the track, in contrast to his father, who saw no point in leaving his workstation. By the time his creations were running, his work on them was done, on to the

next one.

Liz wandered in, Sanjay gave her his mouse to draw with. Having a baby to show off, I left them and went looking for Ken. He had just entered his office, putting an arm around me and laying a comforter down across his couch for Junior to rest on.

“I see you found our new tire-changer,” he said softly, sitting at the opposite end of the couch from me to watch the baby sleep. I took the opportunity to look outside his window, assessing the progress of the garden. I had asked for a little space as soon as I had joined the team, it was cheap therapy. I kept the team in tomatoes, now it looked as if we’d have a steady supply of watermelon this summer as well. “Hummingbirds were out yesterday,” he whispered, as the baby snored.

Ken Hazlett would be the first to tell you he had no knowledge of racecar design, but he is the best administrator I’ve ever seen. He hires the right people, pays them well, then gets out of their way. Nobody gets rich running a racing team, he made his fortune by being a business development consultant, bringing capital together with ideas. He had arranged financing for everything from airlines to motion pictures. As a result of spending leisure time with his clients, he had occasion to attend the odd Formula One or sports car race and became an oft-photographed visitor to various Grand Prix paddocks. Here was another place he could network, gaining confidences and building a new circle of friends, ones who thought he could successfully own a team and manage people.

Twenty years ago, when he was fifty, Ken was flush with a string of HSBC bonuses and stock options. He listened to one person too many telling him that there was nothing else he could accomplish in finance, and decided to bail out of his line of work and bought his way into Formula One. To start with, he bought into one of the midfield teams and used drivers of varying abilities, their only common point being their vast supply of their daddy’s money.

Over the years, his operation had grown to the point, depending on how the economy was going, where he could occasionally hire drivers instead of the other way around. If you define success in this type of racing to be a world champion constructor, or a regular race-winning team, then he hadn’t accomplished anything for much of his tenure. Until I came along, that is, but I don’t want to give the impression that I was a savior or anything—I was just one of many parts.

A large number of drivers, engineers and team owners got their start working for him. He was loyal to his people, and whenever a driver got the call from Williams. McLaren or Ferrari, that driver would forever be welcome in Ken’s hospitality trailer. He had a knack for spotting talent, three of his former drivers went on to win the world championship for other teams.

I remembered seeing his cars years ago, reading *Road & Track* in the Brunswick High School library. For a time, he also had a column reporting on the GPs—pre-ESPN and long before the internet, I had to wait three months for reports to come back from the Continent! His cars were breathtaking—front-mounted radiators, shovel nose (this design found its way to Indy a few years later), mirrors mounted like no one else—way off the car, on supports so the driver could see past the rear wing. He won a few races here and there when F1 wasn’t the summit of auto racing it is today.

When automobile manufacturers became more involved, his team's performance dropped off, because there were fewer top engines to go around. Didn't seem to bother him, though, as long as his friends stopped by his pit stall regularly. Things had picked up since I had arrived, but he was still the same nice guy whom I had read about growing up.

Now, as he worked on Junior's diaper, I wondered if Enzo Ferrari had ever changed one of his employee's newborns, or if there was a vegetable garden growing outside the offices at Maranello. Brian and Sally came in looking for their kids, Ken leaped up to greet them, I noticed a slight wheeze in his breath. I asked him if he'd caught something.

"Seems so, though I feel fine. No sniffles or sinus headache, that's a little peculiar. But since you brought it up, I've decided that I'll give Montréal a miss." As it wasn't unusual for Ken to pass on the occasional race outside of the Continent, I wasn't too concerned. Simon, Marcel, and Brian were more than good enough. Wonder if I'll be bored with air travel at his age, hope not.

Touchdown at Dorval mid-afternoon Thursday, I spent time before the banquets started by grabbing a car and heading to Île des Sœurs with my DSLR. I'd been meaning to take photos of the Champlain Bridge for over five years, and only now was I able to carve out some time. Jeff Buckley T-shirt, Cardinals cap on backward—ah, anonymity...I never have a problem with conversing with people who recognize me—but I do find an obtuse satisfaction that I'm sometimes ignored—I'm not that important!

Compare and contrast to that evening, wearing my sponsor-logo polo shirt, and also wearing fifty photographers and journalists. The beginning of three-odd days of a monument to the hard truth that F1 isn't completely broke. Gimme caps being passed around by the gross, ditto t-shirts and polos and halter tops and promotional thumb-drives...champagne everywhere, caviar that I didn't dare touch (but Jan held up his end), pâté, grass-fed hamburgers (two, medium-well, thanks.)

Oh yeah, the race. We pulled out of our garage Friday morning in a confident frame of mind, happy to be on the fast tracks again. Saturday qualifying bore out our enthusiasm, as we were one-two ahead of the McLarens and Williams with the Ferraris midfield. Now that we were away from the twisty circuits, the low-speed understeer that we had been fighting with had gone away. The cars were perfect everywhere, the engines had room to breathe, Jan and I touched 200 on the straight while the Ferraris barely got to 190. So, while practice wasn't a breeze, the fact that our form from Imola and winter testing was back gave all of the team a boost.

Sunday was fun. Me first, Jan second—Ken, fifteen points. It's a little dangerous to label any race as 'easy', with two hours of destroying the engine, fatiguing the suspension, and vibrating the driver, but nothing bad happened. The track was a ballbuster, traffic was harrowing, and it was hot and humid, but that's the job!

The morons in charge tried to piss me off, though. My pole position got me the inside line for the first corner, trouble was that wasn't the place to be. Like most corners, you want to take a swooping line through, from outside curb to the inside, then back out on the exit. Starting from the inside meant I would have to pinch in, that's really an invitation to get my nose chopped off. Since Jan was on the outside, that would have really looked good. A long

time ago, there used to be a rule that the polesitter could choose to reverse the grid, therefore, I would start off closer to the ideal line.

Progress being what it was, apparently that was no longer kosher according to the FIA. The track representative casually told Simon that on Sunday morning, and when I brought it up again during the drivers' meeting, I was blown off, to be honest. There was no reason for the rule change, if it was legal in the past, and everyone was okay with my request, it shouldn't be a problem for me now. But a couple of hours before the race wasn't the time to get all pissed off, I channeled whatever I felt into building up my confidence. That first corner wasn't going to beat me.

The upshot of it all was that Jan lined up on the racing line, got a better start once the lights went out. He led the first ten laps or so until we'd pulled out a few seconds on the rest of the field, then he towed me down the straight and let me past going past the pits.

This was a strategy we'd discussed on rainy test days in Estoril, with time to kill and a relationship to cement. I disliked being branded as the 'Number One' driver, with the attendant imagery of being fanned by palm fronds and eating peeled grapes. But, if I was "supposed" to be in front (say, on pole or a point lead to defend), and Jan could "fix" it with minimal bother, then he'd do it. The last part of the agreement was that he'd do this once, then race the shit out of me. If I screwed up, no more free passes, too bad for me. You'd think Ken would put us on some sort of team orders in that circumstance, but he knows damn well that we won't bend each other's car.

It wasn't long ago that Jan had the reputation for driving cars into the ground in order to get to the front, with machinery that couldn't handle the abuse. Now he has calmed down somewhat and drives the best cars on the track, but now he goes out of his way to make sure I get race wins and the championship.

Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but the fact remains that his is a selfless gesture, again one that wasn't mandated before he joined us. Some think this has cost him a win or two, important because he hasn't won yet. He's not worried, though, he says he'd rather come in second to me than win by punting me off, and I believe him. If things go the way we want them to, ideally next year will be his turn, I'll certainly do my part.

The race turned out to be an exhibition for the Hazlett-Fords, we finished a lap ahead of everyone else, the Ferraris both blew. Once that happened, the Ford engineers had consulted with Marcel and telemetered changes to the engine management, put them into "cruise control". Jan and I really didn't abuse our cars, but we kept each other busy. Honestly, the race goes quicker and you remain focused if you have some work to do, rather than reel off laps until the checker. And Montréal is a fantastic track that causes me to smile when I think about it, hard work being rewarded.

The crew had a party afterward, celebrating the fact not only had we swept the race but now we were heading to Europe for the next four months. Instead of transacting business halfway around the world from home, we'd be within a time zone or two. We ran the reporters out of questions, signed autographs for everyone in the paddock. It was about eight when the party broke up. Jan was heading to Cozumel for a day or three, and I was flying—somewhere—after a night at the Dorval Courtyard.

Still a decent enough hour for me to call Grace, providing she wasn't busy...

I was so deep in thought that I barely heard the phone ring, was hardly aware that it had been answered. Therefore, I was startled to hear her voice, I choked out something brilliant, and was relieved when she responded to me.

"Hi, Don," she chirped. I sensed her taking a breath, brightening up, becoming excited. "Thanks for the flowers, I brought them to work, everyone's as jealous as hell!" Well, good.

"Is it too late to talk?" I wondered, aware that there might be something in her bedroom that demanded her attention.

She assured me that she was just waiting for the news to come on, but the happy sigh in her voice told me that maybe she'd been looking for some other incentive to stay awake. "I'm glad you called; I was sort of hoping it was you." I heard her settle into a chair.

"Well, I was bored and you came to mind," I mentioned evenly, hoping she'd catch the words and not necessarily the tone.

She did. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, sweetie." I was laughing from her first word. "Let's see: Don's out of the Rolodex, who's next?"

We chuckled and sighed in unison. "Grace, thank you for that kiss last week." I meant it but sometimes things shouldn't necessarily be shared. Unless you want to see what honesty will get you...

"It was the right thing to do, dontcha think?"

"And thank you for *that*, too."

"I wanted it to be memorable. You are memorable, Don."

Oh, God—we're a thing...at that moment, all I wanted was there to be more of those kisses.

I told her about Brian and Sally's baby, with the attendant ooohs and ahs from Grace.

I remembered fighting with John and Marie years ago, suggesting that they needed to get out more, no sense being chained to the baby's crib and all...

Grace felt the same; "Friday, I told my sister that I'd take their kids out to dinner, then we went all over Atlanta shopping. Then they're so tired that they have to sleep over, naturally, and then there's breakfast the next morning...and a car race at noon!"

"Ol' Aunt Grace, the baby-napper," I laughed.

"I don't want to sell you anything," Grace advised me, "but I'm good at kids." She then took a second, choosing her words carefully. "I've done well so far with my nieces and nephews, I mean."

"So you did see the race?"

"Tried to. The kids were alternately wanting to watch Disney and getting ready to get picked up by their parents," she explained. "I didn't feel that I should tell them 'my boyfriend's in the race', and 'a guy I know is in this race' would have sounded even worse."

I understood and told her so.

"But I saw the last lap and the celebration on the podium, and your interview. You really do like champagne!"

I snickered. "Do you mind if I come see you tomorrow?" I asked her. There were things I wanted to know about Grace now, if not sooner. The word "doable" wasn't exactly

right, and “promising” came across as condescending. But I had used the words “want” and “Grace” in the same sentence.

“Oh, I guess so,” she sighed. “Have to shave my legs, dammit. Ah, well, do you know where my office is?”

“If I can’t find it, then I’ll yell for help,” I assured her. “Lost Formula One star found dazed in Waffle House, looking for his date. Identified by his picture in USA Today.”

I told Mom Monday morning that I’d be along soon, but not that afternoon. She gave every impression of choking on her croissant as I told her about my side-trip to Atlanta. She wasn’t shocked about me going out, just the fact that I’d announced it beforehand.

I hung up, opened the door to my room for the maids, and chuckled to myself as I finished putting my things in my case. Sure enough, within five minutes, Marie called from the store in Chillicothe. “I told Mom I didn’t believe it.” I could hear the noise from the c-store in the background as she laughed. “Bout fucking time,” she informed me.

I sighed, though not really disgusted. Chillicothe wasn’t exactly Tierra Del Fuego, so it stood to reason that more than a couple of the customers, not to mention the employees, knew who Marie’s little brother was. “You’d think I’d never gone out with someone before,” I replied.

“Honey, it’s just that your relationships with women have gone as good as, well...mine!” she retorted, and this time I heard her audience give up all pretext of restraint.

“I suppose you don’t need your ego stroked, but she’s been doing nothing but talk about you since last week,” Carol, “Miz CFO”, as she introduced herself, confided to me.

I had found Atlantic Station without too much grief, only a couple laps around a couple blocks until I saw the storefront which read “Grace, Limited”.

A 150-gallon freshwater aquarium was along one wall of the reception room, two fig trees on the other. I’d been paying more attention to office architecture lately, Peterson’s was outgrowing the backroom, spare bedroom stage, it was time to look at expansion, a “corporate headquarters.” I couldn’t imagine a setup like this in Brunswick, though.

“Murphy’s Law,” she apologized, “She got roped into a conference call, could take five minutes, could take an hour.” I understood how that worked. Carol sat next to me on the couch, and remoted the TV off, her phone was near enough and she wasn’t expecting a lot of vendors this time of day. She appeared excited to finally meet me, I assumed it was from Grace’s relentless commentary.

“Missouri, huh? So, what’s a redneck like you doing driving racing cars and flitting around Europe?” she asked.

Redneck, hell.

Ronald Peterson (Dad to me, and to you, too), was a sales manager for an oil company in St. Louis; sure of himself, full of himself, and able to make money. He was twenty-three years old and living with his dad and stepmother in south St. Louis. My mom, Audrey Vossler, was what would be called now an office manager, then a secretary, for the MFA grain elevator in Brunswick.

She had gone along with some of her friends to catch a Cardinal game at Busch downtown. Dad had been buttering up a client in St. Charles and was dropping the company car off at the same parking garage downtown. During the few moments their paths had crossed on the Market Street sidewalk, Dad decided it was time for him to see a Cardinal game again. During the game, Mom spent more time with Dad than with her friends. They won't admit it, but Marie and I think they skipped out early—neither one of them can remember if the Cardinals won or not. They were late getting back to Mom's hotel, and when Dad saw them off the next morning, they had to endure a rash of shit from her friends.

Nobody was laughing two weeks later, when Dad pulled up to the Shell station at the corner of Wabash and Main in Brunswick, got out of his Ford Fairlane (salesman's car if ever there was one) and announced he'd purchased the Farm and Auto parts store in town. Brunswick appeared to be a nice place, he was looking for a house to rent, and did anyone know where Audrey Vossler lived?

That was a ballsy move, even for an outside salesman, and the news traveled quickly across town, to the house that Mom lived with her parents. They walked over to Dad's new place, which was filling up quickly with the stuff he had brought with him.

"I suppose I'd better ask the usual bullshit questions about your intentions toward my daughter," Granddad began.

Dad studied the three of them. He brightened in feigned surprise when he recognized Mom. "Well, small world, Audrey," he began, then addressed her dad. "Sir, I'm sure your daughter is a nice girl and all, but really, all I'm here to do is run my parts store. Why don't you come by? I'd love to have you stop in and shop, and maybe I'll see your daughter around town."

On the way back to their house, Granddad grumbled, but he did allow that the car needed new plugs and an oil change, and he could do that just as well as the dealerships in Moberly and Marshall...

Mom and Dad showed remarkable restraint, waiting almost three weeks before getting married. Eight-and-a-half months later, Marie arrived, and two years after that so did I.

Mom continued to be the backbone of the elevator until the books for the Farm and Auto got to take up more of her time. That doesn't mean we were raking in the cash, but we never went without anything we really needed, such as a good roof or a car that started in winter. The only thing we didn't have growing up were summer vacations outside of the odd three-day weekend to Kansas City or St. Louis. Dad didn't feel comfortable about leaving the store for any period of time until us kids got out of high school, by that time, we were too old to go together, anyhow.

It would be too much of a cliché to say Marie and I were raised in a "loving environment", but that's an apt enough description. Whenever we did something that pissed Mom and Dad off, when some other kids' parents would have put the belt to them, our folks would insist we use our brains to clean up our aberrant behavior, more often than not with a half-smile. They made a point to talk with us at a level just above the one we were at, not condescending, but using concepts and words that would stimulate our intellect and conscience. Just enough to let us know the world didn't revolve around us.

We were encouraged to go out and wander, observe and learn how things worked. Lots of sunburns, wasp bites, stitches and broken knuckles, but Marie and I had the town wired. “The journey, not the destination,” was one of Dad’s favorite sayings. Not exactly original, but it was a pearl to the two of us. Since Dad has said it, it must have been important.

When we were eight and six, a new family moved to town, which was unusual for Brunswick. Like most small towns, the population had slowly been heading to the big cities. John Wheeler, seven years old, from Roanoke, Virginia had come with his parents when the Norfolk and Western transferred him out west. On one of the first visits to John’s house after they had unpacked, he impressed me by whipping out a Collier’s Atlas and showing me where Roanoke was, which roads they had driven, what he had seen on his trip. Marie was impressed, too, but it didn’t become evident for a few more years!

John and his dad took us down to the tracks and educated Marie and me as to what trains were going where, and as I mentioned earlier, I furthered my geography knowledge from the sides of boxcars. By the time I was eight, I vacillated as to what I’d do when I grew up, between working in some nonspecific capacity for the railroad and “firing Dad and running the store!” Marie had it down to either being a fire-“man” or “firing Dad and running the store!”

Dad, for his part, didn’t pressure either of us to carry on any kind of torch by preserving the family business. He did threaten to kick us out when we were graduated from high school (or turned twenty-one, whichever came first), and then retire back to St. Louis. Really, he had made his mark when he saw that Marie and I were turning out okay, no need for some corporate structure lasting generations with his name on it.

In high school, the three of us were regarded as good-natured anarchists, raising hell in a way that caused the teachers to smile in appreciation of our imagination (snort), and to maybe cause other kids to question their own opinions. We were among the worst students in the smartest classes, reading *Rolling Stone* or *Car and Driver* instead of studying, but still getting A’s or B+’s on the work. Instead of attending bullshit pep rallies, we’d play cards in the lunchroom instead.

The people who were the real pocket-protector types, the ones who ran for every student office and signed up for all the clubs were the ones who committed suicide freshman year at Yale or Northwestern, who were arrested for embezzling from their companies, or are still professional students, living from grant to grant. The ones who are actually doing something were the ones who sat in the AV or computer rooms, thinking rather than memorizing. Like the three of us.

We all dabbled in extracurricular activities, though; we weren’t snobs. Marie was on the newspaper until she had figured out that the rest of the staff was interested in re-creating the National Enquirer. John was on the varsity football team his junior year, and we both went out for baseball.

When it came time for the three of us to begin dating and necking and screwing, the only reservation I had with John and Marie going out was the fact that there was no one else remotely close to our group left for me. Both our folks and John’s were relieved that they had paired off, they were both levelheaded about sex. I didn’t want to be kept updated on the

hows and wheres of their couplings, but it was evident that their relationship matured quickly.

Halfway through John's senior year, they announced their marriage plans, that summer once he'd gotten his diploma. To anyone else in town, it would appear absurd that they'd get married so soon, much less have the blessing of their parents. It seemed to be just another white-trash marriage to the town, but Marie and John didn't need to be preached to, thanks.

By then, there was some concern on Marie's part because I hadn't begun an emotional relationship during high school. Sure, take a look inside my car or bedroom, what I was doing looked a lot like what was going on at my sister's place. However, while they were loving each other and successfully making my niece, I was cheerfully screwing around, both figuratively and literally.

I told Marie at the time that she was more concerned about my lack of relationships than I was. I was smart about whom I was with, and taking the contraceptive precautions that the dropouts in the trailer court just couldn't figure out. The women whom I had relations with were of the same mindset as I, they were my friends, we enjoyed ourselves, but we all knew we were incomplete humans, with work to do, with the understanding that commitment was probably a hundred years down the road.

But I was certainly respectful of the effort that my sister and John put into their family. They had been fortunate, and smart enough to capitalize on that luck, I said at the time and I still feel that way. I aspired to that life as well, it just wasn't my time yet.

Marie took classes at Moberly Junior College until Theresa was born, and wound up with an Associate's in Business Administration. John graduated from both truck driving and diesel repair schools, working for the Norfolk and Western until the family business grew to the point that he went to work for Dad full time.

The biggest news in town for years reared its ugly head when the Shell station next to the Farm and Auto developed tank leaks. The EPA required the owner to dig them out and replace them, which he couldn't afford. From our point of view, if the Shell closed, we'd lose a lot of traffic past the store. Dad saw this as an opportunity to both expand our business and ensure our security. Convenience stores were replacing service stations in the big cities and suburbs, but they hadn't been tried in small towns yet. The bank wasn't convinced it would work, either, but Dad persuaded Chariton County Bank to stand us the money. That was the most we'd ever been into the bank, as a family we were betting everything we had that the town would accept the idea.

We tore down the station, built the new one and the parts store, then razed the old store and completed the mall. We had the only station between Carrollton and Moberly with a canopy over the gas island, also the only one in the area to sell both premium and diesel. A beauty shop opened up in the strip mall, as well as a law firm that we wound up using.

And none of that twenty-four hours, seven days a week crap. I felt it was a waste of our time to invite drive-offs and robberies, as well as illegal beer sales. For example, we closed on Thanksgiving and Christmas, nobody needed gas that bad, for crying out loud.

By then, I was also working on B.A. from MCC. Dad left Marie and me to run the store, easy because he was only one door down. Over the years, Dad had accumulated a

number of parts accounts across northern Missouri, when we bought the Shell they began using us for their fuel terminal, too. Mom was spending more time on the back office for the convenience store than she was on the parts store. Selling nine-thousand gallons, or one tankerful per day became commonplace. Within a few years, Dad bought property in Marshall, and opened up “Number Two”. Since Marie had a kid to raise, Marshall became my store.

“Peterson’s” wasn’t a snappy enough name for a c-store, it looked uninspiring on a pole sign. We’d been tossing around ideas. every podunk store used permutations of misspelled words like “Kwik” and “Quik” and “Speedee”. Christ. Dad sort of liked “Gimme your money, then get the hell out,” but it wouldn’t fit on the sign! Tiger, Royal, and Cardinal had already been trademarked, Mom got fed up and suggested “Gas”. I’m not sure, but I think I thought up “Pump ‘n Run”, and everyone else sort of gave in.

The proudest day of my life to that point was the day I opened up the Marshall store. Replaced soon by the first payday, as I cut the checks for my employees. Just like in Brunswick, the Marshall store became the village square, and I was there talking cars with high schoolers, corn with farmers and babies with housewives.

We were always coming up with new ideas for the stores, we got the first ATM in Chariton County, and was the first station to install card-readers for after-hours business. This forward-looking attitude got us mentioned in the trade papers, lots of traffic by our booth at the Missouri Petroleum Retailers annual conventions. I took an interest in these events, I was networking and spreading the story of Pump ‘n Run across the region. Marie had the honorable vocation of getting Theresa started right, so it was down to me to deal with the vendors and suppliers, Shell and the banks.

I took it upon myself to bring stability and respectability to our company’s outlets. I convinced Dad to install water conditioners in each of our stores, so the bathrooms wouldn’t smell like fish wells. Marshall was run with a full-time maintenance person, that way your cashier wouldn’t give you change with Pine-Sol or worse on their hands. We hired older people whenever possible, so the kids would have less reason to make the stores into a hangout.

The name of the tanker company, 1203 Transportation, was Marie’s idea—1203 comes from the DOT/Hazmat stickers on the sides of gas tankers. Other mom-and-pops wouldn’t think too kindly of contracting with another store’s decal’d gas truck, so if we wanted to be agnostic about our pedigree we needed a generic name for that business.

Even with just two stores, we were approached by people wanting to franchise us. That was nice, but Dad wanted badly to keep his eyes on the operation, since it was his money.

Across Wabash from Number One used to be the railroad depot, until it burned down one windy January morning. We bought the land and opened our do-it-yourself car wash. Anyone driving along 24 in the summer could attest to the need for one, after ten miles in the river bottoms, cars would take on a brown cast from all the junebugs. And in September, when the toads began freaking out during mating, the same cars would turn green. The closest wash was in Moberly, by the time you got back, it was hard to tell you’d went!

The roof hadn't even been finished when demand required we open it. John, Dad and I sat on a fence rail watching the lineup one evening. "What do you guys want to call this?" Dad wondered out loud.

"How about 'Car Wash'," John suggested. "It isn't like we have to differentiate with our competition."

I was sitting back, listening to Dad's St. Louis pronunciation compared with the slight Virginia twang John had left from his childhood.

I chuckled. "Car Warsh. W-A-R-S-H."

Dad had a spasm. "Of course. Make fun of our customers' accents. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Is that what they're teaching you up in Moberly?" John wondered.

Nevertheless, up the Car Warsh sign went. Just as I thought, hardly anyone noticed it!

When I was growing up, there was no rich motor racing heritage that spurred my development into the sport/business/benevolent oligarchy that I'm in. Dad had an interest in it, through the parts business he came in contact with racers on occasion. But he had an interest in a lot of things, so that wasn't it.

The closest tracks were in Moberly, Marshall and at the fairgrounds in Sedalia. I would see the odd late model or sprint car being hauled down 24, they didn't cause me to foam at the mouth, though.

Indianapolis was the only race that would definitely be on radio or television in our house. Back in the sixties and seventies, life slowed down to pay attention. But there were other diversions to consider. The baseball Cardinals, and later the Royals were halfway decent ballclubs, and the Blues were on occasion, too. Auto racing was interesting for the wrecks, but even those weren't a topic of discussion like Lou Brock, Jacques Plante or Jim Hart were.

When I was seventeen or so, the folks gave me their old Sable station wagon, I got in the routine of bombing it around the countryside, out wasting time and gas. I avoided the Interstate, looking for twisty state highways, and I wasn't afraid of gravel, either. I didn't imagine that U.S. 65 to Sedalia was Spa or Clermont-Ferrand, but by that age I had become familiar with those tracks. Not because I was a Grand Prix aficionado (just yet), but because I was into European history, World War II, and cataloging place-names. That was an extension of my earlier interest in American geography, the atlas thing again.

I had read a number of books that dealt with "European" (sports car, formula car) racing as a result of this interest in old-world life, and had become interested in the racing stories, because of their romantic and tragic aspects. While taking into account the hyperbole contained in those tales, still I thought it would be interesting to look in on that scene one day. Understanding, of course, that I wasn't going to leave Brunswick for years, if at all. Which was okay; I had an awareness of my place in the world that my contemporaries didn't, I loved working for the family, and had no hair up my ass to bum across the country wasting anyone's money.

Anyhow, as a teenager, racing to me was Porsches, Ferraris, and Lotuses, to the other gear-heads, including John, it was Camaros and Mustangs and Charger R/T's.

My step-grandmother on dad's side had been raised in Sicily, coming over when my grandfather had been rotated back to the States after the war. I learned Italian from her, she also had stories about growing up on the course of the Targa Florio, one of the last cross-country sports car races. We would spend hours on Saturday nights at their house in St. Louis, Marie and me, learning about the difference between Italian and Sicilian dialects, and the differences between Alfas and Ferraris. Yes, it would be interesting to take a shark-nose Ferrari through the streets of Monte Carlo, even though I figured the closest I'd get to a Ferrari was if I painted the station wagon red!

I was never a technical type when it came to my car, I followed my Dad's advice in that regard; "The most important thing to know about fixing cars is where to take them when they break!" Instead, he directed me to be sympathetic to the car, finding its limits, and staying a healthy distance away from them.

"That way, nothing gets bent, especially you. Cheaper that way, in the long run," he told me. Occasionally I'd fuck up, with a bent wheel or a popped molding to show for it. But that was better than the druggies running their Trans-Camaros into the back of Schwan's trucks or wrapping pickup trucks around the front of a train.

When I was twenty, I'd graduated to a Crown Vic that the company was writing off as a parts chaser, though I was usually going from Marshall to Moberly and back home. I was putting shitloads of miles on the odometer, rain or shine, tornadoes or blizzards. I pulled into Dad's lot after a parts run to Carrollton, there was a late-season snowstorm going on. After shaking the snow off, I flung myself onto a stool, resting my head on the counter.

"How bad?" Dad asked.

"'Bout six inches, really wet, nothing to get excited about."

A guy I half-remembered from around Marshall spoke up. "Hell, last time I saw you it was 'only two inches of ice, no big hooey'."

"What do you want me to say?" I shrugged. "Ya do what'cha do. I'd rather have it eighty degrees out, but so what?"

"Well, what would bother you? What would be too much?" he responded. I pondered that, having no idea what he was leaning toward. If he hadn't been so personable and spent a lot of money with us, I would have felt that I was being psychoanalyzed.

"Shit, I don't know; it doesn't matter what the road's like, there's a speed for it." You're right, he replied.

"You ever thought about going racing?" he wondered, casually shifting his position at the counter. How did he get from ice storms to racing?

"Maybe, but not the bombs around here," I allowed, at least I was honest about thinking about it.

"Don't knock it," he retorted. "There's just as much technique involved as in the fancy stuff, besides, it's the only game in town." He had a point there, Jackie Stewart and Jim McKay hadn't been around to broadcast the Brunswick Grand Prix lately.

"Tell you what," he continued, as he got up to leave in his four-by, "when this shit melts, come look me up. It'll be a way to kill a couple of hours, at least." He handed me a business card, "Robert Decker, Race Car Design and Fabrication," it read.

“My shop is right behind the track,” he assured me, as I tried to remember where the track was exactly in Marshall. I figured I’d just look for light poles on the horizon, I ought to get lucky after a while.

A couple of weeks later, I made my way from the store to the track, looked over the back fence and found Decker’s shop. He showed me around, his operation consisted of building and repairing Late Models, stylized versions of Monte Carlos and Fusions, resembling the showroom versions like a condor does a parakeet. I was impressed by his layout, not because I’d found Xanadu, but because I admired any professionally run operation.

Enough bullshit, he decided, throwing me a set of Nomex overalls and a helmet. Once outfitted, we walked to a Chevy Malibu. This was a “Stock Car”, the bargain basement level of racing. Depends on where you’re from, they’re either called bombers, hobby stocks or sportsmans, but they look pretty much the same throughout the country—junk.

I was glad I was getting into one of these, rather than one of Decker’s new Fusions. This Chevy is just like my own car, I assured myself. Nothing to get excited about, this will be just like driving around a parking lot. Aside from the rollbar, it looked like any one of a half-dozen beaters in the local trailer courts.

I climbed in, Robert did my belts, and out I went. One good thing about rear-wheel drive is the ability to throw the car around in corners. I did a score of laps, looped it a couple of times, tapped the wall once, but otherwise I enjoyed myself. The car ran out of gas, by design I suspected, and I coasted to a stop in front of Decker.

“How’s it handle?” Robert asked, sticking his head in the window.

“How the hell should I know?” I laughed. “Handled me just fine!” I didn’t jump out of the car with wet pants, looking for something faster, but he told me years later he could see the wheels turning in my eyes.

“What’s a good speed around here?” I wondered, with the tone of voice more suited for idly killing time in the stands.

“Eighty-eight, ninety-two, I guess.”

“Okay, so what was I doing?”

He paused, his tone became more circumspect. “Seventy-five.”

I chuckled, thinking that he was afraid to tell me. You got to start somewhere, I decided, and I wasn’t overwhelmed by the relative speed of the car.

I thanked him, shook his hand, told him I’d see him around the station.

Driving back home, there was something flitting around my brain, not ready to light yet. I thought about Dad. He demanded that Marie and I be responsible and mature beyond our years, and his leading by example—to place his family above himself—was obvious even to his kids. Servant leadership—how he ran the Farm and Auto with a couple employees.

Which was how I was now running Pump ‘n Run with twenty-five! My heart fluttered—was I doing it the right way? I *had* to be...

That thought of mine finally settled. I remembered something Dad told us two kids a few years previous. “Master something. Become expert at it, then show others how—and why—you do it that way. Teach and lead. Have fun and show how hard the work is and how

much you love it.

“And then...find something else and do it over again. Sure, there are lots of honorable people who do one thing well—they have my respect. But you kids...Marie, Don...do *two* things.”

I thought about that racetrack in my rearview mirror and smiled. The next day, I drove to Kansas City, found a racing supply store, and loaded up my Visa on everything from triple-layer Nomex to shoes and gloves. No sense getting into this thing—*second* thing—halfway...

I heard a door open behind us, and Grace came out, smiling, though I know how much of a P.I.T.A. speakerphone calls can be.

“Are you out here stealing my boyfriend?” she demanded of Carol playfully as I stood up to meet her.

Carol laughed as she drifted back behind her desk. “No, your *boyfriends* are safe.”

Grace looked back toward Carol’s desk long enough for me to cast a glance in that direction, too. When I was distracted, then she planted a long, wet kiss on me. “I missed you,” she sighed as she pulled away. Not so fast, I thought, pulling her back and returning it. “Missed that, too,” she whispered.

She showed me off to the others in her office, most of them were leaving anyhow, so we held station in the lobby as they filed past. A few of them recognized me, or at least had heard my name somewhere before. Probably from Grace saturating everyone with news about me, that is, according to Carol. And none of them seemed blasé about Grace bringing a boyfriend to work, that made me feel good.

There were none of her employees dressed in what I considered to be business attire, mostly polo shirts and slacks for the men, slacks for the women. “I figure, why bother with some arbitrary dress code when the only people they’ll come in contact with are Carol and me?” Grace explained.

“At my stores,” I replied, “we have a sorta-dress code, but I don’t want our people to look alike, smocks and all; Stepford cashiers. You wear a badge and act like it’s your store, not some company’s store that you work at. You do that, and I won’t care what you wear. And people have personalities, some people don’t act self-assured in business suits, like I feel out of place in a T-shirt.”

“You do make a compelling argument for dressing up,” she noted, admiring my suit. She slipped her arm inside mine, as we left the office and walked kitty-corner across the street for dinner.

“Thanks,” I replied. I got this one at Barney’s, the best part of any trip to New York. I’d read about the place in a *Vanity Fair* I’d come across on one of my first airplane trips years ago and was intrigued by that lifestyle and that store. I aspired to needing that service and was pleased with myself when I started frequenting them. Nothing fancy, sticking with the classics, like this black pinstripe. This particular suit was three years old, didn’t look it.

“Of course, you don’t practice what you preach,” I turned to her, appraising her white blouse, red highlights on the sleeves and collar, matching her red skirt. Sheer enough that I could see her bra through the material, charmed by the lacy pattern. A bra that was meant to

be noticed.

She looked down momentarily, smiled. "This is different, I'm entertaining." She leaned into me. "Showing off, whatever you want to call it.

"How about you, Mister Formula One Star, why do you dress up? I thought you could look like a hobo as long as you could go fast."

"Well, where I come from, the only time you're in a suit is when you're getting married or buried," I told her. "But that's at home. In public, I don't want to make waves. I'm pretty conservative, I want to impress people, not disgust them or have them find me... 'amusing' in some condescending way. My sponsors like that, too. This is as much my uniform as my overalls, and more comfortable, too."

We were eating at The Pig And The Pearl, turkey for me, brisket for her. Turned out we both liked to watch people. The joint was crowded, but I couldn't find anyone who looked as good as Grace. And listening to the conversations around us, no one else could carry on a dialogue at her level, either.

"I spent way too many late nights on the internet last week," she told me as we ate. "Anyhow, I did find out that the guy who won the NASCAR championship last year made ten million bucks."

I knew where this was going, I thought, but that was okay. "Yeah, but comparing that to me is like apples and oranges. That amount is what the driver earned for the car owner, he probably got 50 percent of that, and a retainer.

"I don't get any prize money. That goes directly to the team. Ken pays me, he gets it from the sponsors."

"Next stupid question, Don..." Grace teased. I could lie, she'd find out from some quarter or another; I could avoid the question, she'd get pissed.

Here goes. "Salary? Thirty-two million." I eyed her evenly, looking for her reaction.

"And I paid for your seat upgrade last month? Fuck."

"I'll pay you back," I chuckled. I hated to tell her about my endorsement fees...

"One way or the other," she winked. "I just didn't want to drink alone!"

"Son of a bitch," she continued. "I got a call from my accountant Friday, he was all excited, more equity investors wanted me to go see them. Seven figures in my Fidelity, twenty people gainfully pulling a salary because of me. Then you blow in here with your thirty-two million.

"I figured, you coming to town and all, we could have a hell of a party, then I open my big mouth and you let that drop." She tried to pout, but she just couldn't pull it off.

"Hell, you worked for yours," I laughed. I told her about my detachment from the family business, my trip back home after Houston. "Really, sometimes, I feel like I'm guilty of something, all this money; I just get a kick out of driving. After the first million or so, it all runs together, anyhow."

"You're bragging," Grace cautioned me. "I'd like to see for myself how it all runs together."

"What I mean is, I can't wake up tomorrow and say 'I want to spend five million bucks today', I literally can't do it. Therefore, there's no point discussing it." And one thing I found

as I wove around the circumference of the Achiever Class—they don't talk about their money. It doesn't come up in conversation. At best, it's grease for the rails.

The sun was going down as we said our farewells to the restaurant staff and walked to Grace's condo. I have a flat in London, though I'm rarely there. Metropolitan areas aren't my idea of a place to live, but it's easier to get around. Necessary evil. "Why here, Grace?"

"Besides my office being a block away?"

"Chicken / egg."

"You've a point. I was raised in Union City, half-suburb, half-farms, down 85. I moved closer to Atlanta for beauty school, then my cachet—reputation, whatever dictated that I be a cosmopolitan city girl rather than a commuter to and from acreage. I've come to love it here, which honestly surprised me," she said as she opened the door and a cairn terrier yipped a hello. A neighbor walked by with her pug and volunteered to walk Ginger, Grace handed a five to her along with profuse thanks.

"Nice puggie—her mom works at Delta TechOps," Grace began. "Has to be prepared to leave town to go who knows where for however long. To be honest, there are about six of us who are adept and flexible enough to sit on each others' dogs—and there's a size limit so nothing's too daunting."

Time for the tour, then. Two beds / two baths, open kitchen, black stone countertops. Squeaky clean. Same for the living room, ceiling fans everywhere, in this room the fan also included a small chandelier.

"Bedrooms are a mess," Grace yelled over her shoulder as she went down the hall to close the door to hers, the other bedroom acted as her office. "Maybe you'll get to see mine someday!" She laughed to herself.

Very small balcony, partially obstructed aspect of downtown; I could see the aqua condo next to my hotel. Below us, the dogs did their thing.

Back inside, I studied the magazines arrayed on her coffee table as Grace scrounged up a couple Diet Cokes. Popular Photography, The National Review, Forbes, to name a few. All labeled "G. Hamilton" or "G.S. Hamilton".

"What's the 'S' for?" I yelled toward the kitchen.

"Siân," she said immediately as if she knew what I was looking at. "'S-I-Â-N'. My daddy wanted something distinctive." She brought the sodas with her as she settled down next to me on the couch, heels off, feet up on the table. "How about Don? Not Donald? Donny?"

"That's what my dad wanted," I replied. "Just Don. No middle name, either—Marie's the same way. They figured one name was enough.

"Grace Siân Hamilton." I rolled it over my tongue. "Sounds classy and well-bred."

"None out of two ain't bad," she lied.

We sat on the couch, her in my arm, as we listened to the birds settling into their branches. The way she was resting allowed her blouse to gap open at the buttonholes, and I was caught up in studying the contrast between the lace top of her bra and her skin.

"You have such a peaceful look on your face when you're doing that," she jolted me back to reality. She had a smile on her face as she said that, her puffy cheekbones shining in the fading light. This wasn't her office, or her car, neither of us could laugh this off, nor did

we want to.

For a moment, I couldn't think of a smart-ass answer. "You're pretty," is what I settled on, in more of an apologetic tone than a statement of fact.

She leaned over to me, our lips meeting. There was that tongue of hers again, I thought, as my nerves jumped when she filled my mouth. I reached further around her and squeezed, feeling the fabric of her blouse slide along her skin. Thank God she isn't ticklish, I thought, because I was becoming enamored of her curves.

She fell back against the couch, a smug look on her face.

"Ginger will be back in a minute. Let's not get in the middle of anything."

"Too late." That earned another kiss, then the door opened and Ginger jumped up.

Grace got up to thank her neighbor. I had spent the time since we had met trying to convince myself that Grace hadn't been a pleasant dream. Indeed, she seemed to touch all the bases: Intelligent, attractive, and appropriately impressed with my lifestyle. I got the impression from her that she was relieved that I was flesh and blood, too.

Every second that passed without me finding some flaw in her caused my heart rate to increase logarithmically. Nothing silly or esoteric like her slightly asymmetric nose or the fact that her right breast seemed with a cursory observation to be slightly larger than her left. My God, she's human. And then she was in my lap.

What did I do? Something right.

"Now that's done, here's something...I need to tell you this," she began. Good, hearing her express her personality was every bit as interesting as our necking. And as necessary.

"I have a line—I mean, I don't do things. You need to know that."

I let my breath out. "Good. You stand for something."

She sighed, too, looked at me steadily but with relief in her eyes.

"I make it a habit not to read the last page of a book first, lady. I know this much: You deserve to be earned."

"I suspect you will, too." I think she understood the weight of the words she'd said, one tear. "I'm sorry. This happens."

No, this is *happening*. "Nothing to be sorry about. Happens to me, too."

Unsolicited, she told me a story. "A million years ago, my adolescence and my puberty weren't in lockstep—and neither were finished when my supposed adulthood started. To make a long story short, I had to learn how to act.

"To make it longer, All through junior high and high school, apparently I was too big, and too tall for that little society to wrap their brains around."

Their loss, I thought. She was beautiful. Thankfully, the woman who was resting on my lap knew that and was becoming comfortable in opening herself up.

"Finally, out of high school. Finally, in the big city. Finally, being around people who were confident themselves and became less judgmental, at least about exteriors.

"The world of adults, and I was almost ready to fit in. There was one thing—remember what I said about certain parts of my psyche not being as fully formed?"

I did, I sort of had an idea what was coming up but—

"I guess you can say I overcompensated, or as I like to put it, I fucked everything with two legs and a couple with one less. In a lot of permutations. I was good at it, and that thrilled me. But at the same time, I found that I wasn't a one-note, this extrovertedness meant that I learned how to talk, how to network, how to be a friend. My self-esteem went through the roof.

"And I was never hurt in my relationships. I had fun, I was GGG—Good, Giving, and Game." I knew of that phrase.

"I respected my partners—we were and for the most part are still friends. No arrests, no abortions, no viruses. I maybe might have been on the 'Atlanta's Top 100 Sluts' list, but I did it the right way.

"After a few years, still fucking up a storm, still good at it, still no regrets, suddenly something popped into my head in a moment of reflection: There's *something else out there*. It may have been one too many Kay Jewelry commercials, maybe a second watching my half-sister and her hubby changing a diaper and being struck by their interaction, but being good in bed wasn't enough anymore."

"So I quit. Cold turkey. And I was met with nothing but support. Nothing changed in my relationships with my friends. We've scattered for the most part, but we're good people. Especially me and I'm proud of who I am."

"It shows, Grace. Thank you for allowing me in. It's an honor, to be trusted, to be in your world." And also some kind of psychic responsibility.

"Like I said, I have a line that won't be crossed. That doesn't just mean there are things I won't let you do—it means that there are things I won't let *myself* do. It feels so good to have that rule and to abide by it. But it's hard to express, I can't imagine that society at large can accept it, or even comprehend it."

"Grace, to be crass and to the point," as I took a drink of my soda, "I've had a lot of sex. I don't need to ride that bike every day."

Another tear. "You get it. Thank you."

"And one other thing." She looked up at me. "I didn't forget a thing about how I lived. And I'll do it again. In a better context—*with* a context. That's a promise." An absolutely nasty smile and my heart lurched.

But it was time for bed, and mine was at the Residence Inn again. Grace walked my to her car under protest from Ginger. "So, Don Peterson, here's a philosophical question for you," she spoke as she pinned me against the front fender.

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, didja ever wake up and just know your life was going to change that day?"

"To be honest, I'm sort of resigned to it," I replied, though that didn't seem to be the response she would have liked. "Really, what I mean is, I must seem from the outside to be more in control than I really feel I am, but it isn't so. Doesn't make me mad, just have to be willing to float a little.

"In a broad sense, the less I micro-manage things, the more I'm in control. For example, I wasn't looking to find a companion when you said hello in Houston—but I ain't about to turn the other way."

Grace smiled. Nice save. “But I know what you’re thinking,” I continued. “You are unusual, I don’t have a girl in every port, I’m grateful that I saw you again, and let’s do this again tomorrow.”

I got a text from her late Tuesday morning, as I was debating to get out of bed—exhausted mentally from digesting Grace’s testimony. She and Carol would be by in thirty minutes to take me to lunch at Pizza Hut. This probably meant three people crammed into a store that was geared toward delivery and carryout, but I’d done this before and I got to see Grace again, after all...

A Kia Sedona arrived, Carol driving, Grace waving me into the sliding passenger door. Carol reached back to give a half-squeeze / half-handshake and then it was off to lunch. Turned out that we were buying lunch for her office, and since I had my tablet and cell phone, it really didn’t matter where ‘here’ was.

A pleasant afternoon shooting the shit, then back to Grace’s condo. I was flying back to see the folks the next morning, so turning in early combined with that big late lunch meant that we got down to smooching quickly.

Necking on the couch again, under Ginger’s watchful eye. Given that there were limits, I was determined to enjoy them and accept working within those parameters. Grace had some clarifying to do, however. I had made the remark that she was a ‘carpenter’s nightmare’, “not a flat spot on you”, she blushed, took a breath...

“Take my blouse off.”

Hundred-and-thirty beats per minute. I didn’t move my hands, looked up at her. The slightest of nods, “I want you to see me.”

Okay. You have some ‘splainin to do, Lucy. But she was clear in her desires. I started on the bottom button. “That’s the line. We get to play from this point on up,” tracing her puffy tummy along the waist of her skirt.

Expensive bra. Front hook. “You planned this,” I whispered.

“Oh my God. You have no idea.”

This was deep, textured and wise-assed commentary wasn’t called for.

I did what she wanted. I was right, she was uneven, which meant she was perfect. She giggled. God loves me and wants me to be happy. She reached to me, pulled me to her. Heat and perfume and delightful suffocation. She got kissed and sucked and nibbled and I felt like I’d never done this before.

But it had to end. Blouse back on, but her bra stayed snagged to her ceiling fan. Nothing to the imagination, she saw the look on my face and chuckled. “Gee, I think my car needs gas,” she remarked, her breasts swaying, nipples visible through the material. “Give somebody at the gas station a thrill.”

“Yeah, I used to be one of those poor cashiers,” I replied. “Sunday morning, I’d keep the paper rack almost empty, so those housewives in their sweats would have to beeeend on down to get the last *Star* or *Post-Dispatch*.”

“Now you know. It probably wasn’t an accident,” she concluded, as we drove back to the mall. That was also before ESPN began running Grands Prix at the crank of dawn—priorities, you know.

Okay, she lived in a gated development, but she also had to drive me back to the hotel through neighborhoods of varying quality. And it was Atlanta. At ten at night.

"That's why I'm strapped." She opened up her Vera Bradley bag. "Ruger .38 LCP. The gun's legal and so am I."

"Alrighty then!"

France:

After landing at Lambert, in Keytesville I came across John's gas tanker heading back from the tank farm at Moberly. I honked and waved, he responded by flashing his running lights and speeding up. We drafted the rest of the way into Brunswick.

After we "hi-how-are-ya"-d while we set the hoses and pulled the valves on the tanker, we strolled over to the Farm and Auto as the tanker unloaded. John waited until we'd sat at the parts counter to interrogate me.

"So, what's up with this new girlfriend of yours?" He was smirking and Dad was trying not to laugh.

"Jesus," I sighed. "Did Marie put an ad in the paper or something?"

"Might as well have," Dad admitted.

"Well at least we can maintain an intellectual conversation, which is more than I can say for you bunch of gossips," I muttered with a half-smile. John left out the front door to tend to the truck, I wound my way back through the storeroom to the office.

I came across Marie back there, working on a PC with one hand and faxing with the other. Since she was busy, she escaped my wrath for the moment. I found a stack of reports and flopped into a chair. I read the start-up report from the new Moberly store, studying the P & L's as Marie chatted with other stores.

Studying intently, I forgot what I was upset about. "So, what's it like to be a Coke dealer?" she asked presently.

"No, chu got it all wrong," I replied in some nonspecific accent, "I a respectable businessman!"

"Hi, son, I thought I heard your voice," Mom said, bringing in a rubber-banded stack of bank receipts. "Been out to Coca-Cola yet?"

"Nah, just got in," I replied as she leaned down to hug me, "though I've heard an earful already about my social life." I looked over my glasses at my dear sister.

She was just giving me shit, but it seemed like it had been going one way recently. "I've had nothing but grief since I told y'all I was going out on one, just one, date." Well, it was up to two. Or three...

John wandered back, the air filter from his truck in his hand. He got the hell out upon hearing that, as Mom replied, "We just want you to be happy."

"Or keeping from being bent over by some golddigger," Marie put in.

"Hell, I'm not a kid anymore, besides, Grace has her own money."

“So,” Mom smiled, “She has a name, after all. Why don’t you humor an old lady and tell us about her?” John tried to nose in again, a new filter in his hand as he flipped the WIX box onto Marie’s desk.

I did ten minutes on Grace, how we met, how she looked, what she did for a living. Actually, I spent eight minutes on how she looked, two on the rest! When I was done, I looked around, I was on the edge of my chair, my hands out in front of me, gesticulating as I described her. Mom and Marie were smiling at each other.

“Must have been a hell of a date,” Marie deadpanned.

“We’re good.” I smiled as I got up to leave. Everyone knew I was done talking about Grace for now, I wanted to see my lawyer before I headed to Moberly. We all got up to walk through the store.

There was a nice humid southeast breeze coming in the open front door as we small-talked. Rain tonight, I thought, and the radio announced a tornado watch to confirm the possibility. All the more reason to get a move on, I told the folks.

John pulled back onto 24 as I ducked into the office of Maxwell Anschutz, Attorney at Law, conveniently located two doors down the mall.

About six years ago, halfway through my first season of Formula Atlantic, I went to see Max. He was the counsel for the store, in addition to that healthy contribution to his ledger, he did the odd family law and bankruptcy cases for the town.

Budweiser was waving contracts at me, so was my car owner. I threw the papers at Max and said, “This isn’t your usual foreclosure or house closing, I know that much. But I want to keep the business in town, so to speak, so I’d like to give you the first crack at it. Now, when—not if—I get successful, I’m going to get contracts that’ll make this one seem puny. Also, I’ll get more of them, and more complicated.”

I let that dangle for a second. “And I know every other driver has law firms with seventeen names on their letterhead.”

He said he’d think about it, and we’d get in touch. Walking down the sidewalk the next day, my path was blocked by a sign painter, putting the last strokes on the door. “Anschutz, Anschutz, A.P.C.” gold leaf, looked really keen.

“Who’s the other Anschutz?” I asked.

“My wife,” Max replied.

“Didn’t know she was a lawyer.”

“Never said she was.”

“So who’re the partners?”

“Hunter Thompson and Gordon Liddy.” His tick-hounds, sleeping on the front sidewalk. We stood back to regard the sign. “It’s not seventeen names, but it’s a start.

“By the way, Don, I leased a new Escalade. Wanna buy me lunch?”

Along with an underworked agent in England, Max still does my legal work today. Even with being ten percent as rich as I, he still lives in the same house, same wife, same clients. I said hello to his daughter, interning between years at Ball State. Max came up from his office, the three of us chatted about daughter Becky’s engagement, and “the wedding Don’s paying for!”

The radio was going off with another alarm tone, we looked out the window, speculating on where the action was. The sooner I got done, I told them, and they were anxious to see me finish my errands safely: "Don't get caught in any tornadoes, Don," Becky called out as I backed the Ford out.

I left the window down, listening to the trees rustling as I drove to Moberly. Arriving at Coca-Cola around four, the employees and I sat on the loading dock shooting the shit. To anyone walking the alley, it looked like we were killing time until closing, really I was making sure these people understood who the 'new guy' was, and how much I needed them to make the company work.

The place was in downtown Moberly, in a converted grocery store that wasn't worth rebuilding, no room to expand in any case. The previous franchisee wasn't in any financial position to make improvements, nor to market the product line effectively. Market share had declined, the best salespeople left, the morale of those left was in the dumpster. The employees I met with on the dock were smart, hard working, but their initiative was seriously diminished. All the self-starters in the world wouldn't amount to much without some support from above, and some capital to make things move easier. That's when Coca-Cola canceled the franchise and called me.

"Boys and girls," I began, "You know the industrial park north of town, between 24 and the tracks to Decatur?" A few nods. "Well, when I was in Atlanta last week, I asked them what you needed. I got a hell of a shopping list from them, I can assure you." Some laughs, as we looked again at the building. "They came up with this," I unrolled an artist's rendering of a new warehouse, lots of land, an honest loading dock, fuel tanks, secure perimeter. That drew oohs, and a few pats on the back, the crew moved forward to get a better look.

"Now, my brother-in-law is heading to Portland to talk to Paccar about some trucks I want, and Atlanta's got a few flatcars loaded with gooseneck trailers coming up." That got the route drivers to smiling. Now I turned to the salespeople. "And Moberly Ford has a lot full of Fusions and F-150s to look at, those Chevys you've got now look like shit."

Then to everyone: "And you're all now on my company's benefit plan, 401(k), ESOP, and all that jazz." That brought outright cheers, something to take back to their families.

"God, I love spending money. Now, y'all go home and get laid!"

Ten minutes later, I was sipping a cold Diet Coke inside the loading door, watching a thunderstorm with the general manager and the transportation chief. These were the guys who hurt the worst as the previous ownership ran the place into the ground, the ones who took a lot of the blame unjustly. Now we were going to change that. I had known most of these guys from my stores, it had been a long trip.

A downburst from the storm was hitting the city, kicking up dust from Moberly Valley Speedway, spreading over this side of town.

"Yep, old Muddery Valley," they toasted the dust cloud. The transportation man used to run a wrecker in town for spare cash, Saturday nights would find him at the track, occasionally pulling my car off the fence.

"Twenty hobby-stocks, lining up for the start of the fifteen-lap feature event. Here

they come, the starter looking them over, checking the lineup...trying to get these drivers aligned properly...he says 'What the fuck?', and lets them go anyway!"

Every Saturday night, that would be the sound as Malibus and Monte Carlos and Crown Vics roared and rattled off into the night. Decker had hooked me up with a Grand Marquis, modified for hobby-stock by putting in a roll cage, six-point belts, racing seat and fuel cell. I spent my first summer in racing on a Moberly-Marshall axis, cheerfully getting my internal organs ground to a pulp.

By the end of that year the bodywork had been beat around the frame and roll cage, so that the only way you could tell it was a Ford was to open the hood. Brand loyalty wasn't as prevalent as in the higher classes, more it was a matter of whatever was available.

Only the foolish imagined themselves getting rich in this class, either you were using this as a stepping-stone to something else, or like me, you were out to have fun, prove our abilities to ourselves and anyone in the stands that cared to watch.

Although I hadn't used any of the family money, I thought it would be a nice gesture if I advertised our business. I used a portable compressor and a bay in the car wash to shoot a coat of refrigerator white onto the car. When it was dry, I pried the boxelder bugs off the finish and started slapping dry-transfers on. Pump 'n Run, Peterson's Farm and Auto on the quarter panels and hood, STP, Bosch spark plugs, Shell lubricants on the remaining places. Compared to the other junkers, it looked like my car was a fully sponsored, high-dollar effort. That caused a little friction in the infield until I told the other drivers the sad truth!

In any cheap novel, I would have won the first race I entered, married the trophy girl, and Roger Penske would have been driving through town, stopped off to get a cheese pretzel and noticed my innate professionalism. Next stop, Indy.

Sorry. I finished dead last in my first race, blew a tranny in the second, and was the last one running on the lead lap in the third and fourth. But, by July I was advancing to 'B' features, and in August I made my first appearance in an 'A'.

Aside from the transmission, I had gone through a couple of radiators, a few tires, and Decker had put an alignment or two on the car.

I hadn't wrecked big time yet, indeed I was beginning to anticipate and avoid fuckups in front of me on the track. Decker had begun to notice that I was beginning to ask for certain things relating to the setup in between races. He also commented that I was becoming more articulate about driving and racing. I noticed this too, I was enjoying the mental aspect of racecraft, and was starting to think the races were too short. I was sure there was something in the car I could figure out and drive around, I thought, but there wasn't time!

I also looked forward to weekend nights in the pits, bullshitting with the other drivers. I hadn't been around people who talked and thought the same language as I since I dove into the C-store business.

In mid-September, at Marshall's last race of the year, I won my first 'A' feature. Since it was the close of the season, there was a bit of hoopla involved, such as live radio and my picture in the Saline County paper. That was the first clipping my dad put up in the store.

Come the next weekend, with no diversions but Mizzou football, I was beside myself.

That fall, I basically bounced off walls, hanging around the stores after my shift, staring longingly at the calendar, marking the days until the next racing season. We had a dreary winter, making it worse.

One enjoyable aspect of my line of work is that I have to be on the road during winter, testing in southern Europe. Winter in Missouri is something to avoid. Not just for the blizzards and ice storms, but for the fact that everything *dies*. The trees lose their leaves, and a few boughs, too. The grass turns brown, the river freezes over. The wind sounds like the gasps of an old man with emphysema. It isn't like the Alps, where tons of snow cover the landscape and cause it to fall asleep until spring. In Missouri, nothing sleeps. You get dirty slush covering everything, rather than cosseted in white, the country looks like it's undergoing chemotherapy.

And the people! Grouchy, irritable. You can't fish, can't farm, hunting gets old, nothing left to do but sit in taverns and bitch about the next cold front. Road tripping is an excuse to get your car bent. Singing "Winter Wonderland" around Brunswick is a sure way to get a buttful of buckshot.

But spring, that's more like it. The geese move back, even Russian thistle is welcome. One person I met at the store kept track of the first bug-splat on his windshield to record the arrival of spring; another, the first weather watch. Of course, spring began for me when the first auto race came on television! Harleys came out of storage, convertible tops were removed, and the women began showing their legs and breasts again. They seemed as amazed as me that they had survived the winter intact.

The smells! It seemed like my olfactory senses quit when the cold set in. By the first of May, I could sit down on the curb of the store and get a snootful. Hot asphalt, ninety-six degrees on Chariton County Bank's sign, eighty degree dewpoint. Creosote from the Wabash tracks blending with the smell of river water running off boat trailers at the gas pumps.

Drinking fountain sodas, skipping ice chunks across the lot with Chariton County deputies, engines ticking, water dripping off air conditioner condensers. Wind whistling through poplars and maples, as locusts warmed up for the evening.

The C-store would be jumping, so too the parts store. Dad said that if you had a car to work on days like this, you'd never need a psychiatrist or a marriage counselor. More therapy could be found in the form of the Cardinal game on the Moberly radio station, the horn of the train and the squeal of railroad car wheels as they passed over the crossing.

Though I hadn't been aware of it, Decker had been in to see Dad a few times over the winter, apparently to chat him up regarding how well I had done the summer before. Personally, I was under no illusions as to how I had performed; anyone could tell I was just getting my feet wet. No one that I knew of was putting me under a microscope, I was having fun, and as long as I wasn't a hazard to anyone else I was happy.

Decker had other views, Dad had heard him out, and one spring morning I came in the door of the parts store and found them awaiting me. The fact that they stopped talking as I entered told me something was up, I knew they didn't want to know my feelings on ethanol

subsidies.

Had I given any thought to racing late-models this year, they wondered?

“What, did I just win the lottery and forget to tell you?” I waved them off. “Those cars are for race drivers, not dabblers like me.”

“I’m serious,” Dad insisted. “Robert here feels like you could make some money at it, if you had a real car instead of that taxicab you’re in now.”

“Omaha, Lincoln, Quincy,” Robert joined in. “Lots of exposure for your business.”

I wasn’t sure to thank Decker or not. “Yeah, like Pump ‘n Run is expanding into those markets in my lifetime.”

“Well think of it as advertising for my chassis business, then,” he hedged.

“Then you’re going to cut me a deal on a Fusion, right?”

“Guess that means yes,” Dad laughed.

To be honest, they could have picked a worse time to bring it up. Both of the stores were making money, my folks’ house had been built, John had help on the gas truck. Theresa was out of the toddler stage, and I was in the home stretch of college. I figured Dad had received good advice; Robert would have provided him the figures. Therefore, I didn’t waste any worries about putting the folks into the poorhouse.

Dad bought an F-350 diesel pickup (parts delivery, mind you), a better car hauler, yanked John out of Marie’s bed, and off we went. Northern Missouri, Southern Iowa, Omaha, Pevely. We made up for a lifetime of staying in town in one summer.

I took to late-models quicker than hobby-stocks, winning my first feature in Omaha in July. That was followed the next weekend at Adams County, Iowa. The competition was tougher, these guys wouldn’t think twice about going three hundred miles to a race. A lot of them ran the circuit every year, the NASCAR point fund made it worthwhile to race, it was also good exposure for various family bodyshops and junkyards. If I would have been totally objective, it would have been at this time when I noticed my talent in a car. I was as fast as anyone, I was sympathetic to the car, and I knew who to race and who not to trust.

In late-models, there were a couple of rich boys, a few incompetents, but most of us thought in a mature and responsible manner. Dad made the difference obvious: “Look here,” he pointed to an impromptu driver meeting one evening. “Over here, there are guys wearing sneakers, open-face helmets, no gloves, no firesocks—you’ll be dodging their wrecks, or passing them. Now here,” pointing to another group, “all the goodies, full-face helmets, triple layer Nomex; but they’re just posing, not talking, not learning. You’ll qualify in front of them.”

Finally, we regarded the remaining drivers, the ones with the enclosed car haulers, with sponsorship painted on the sides. “These guys are the ones who have been doing this a long time. Sure, they have all the jewelry, but they’re also talking to each other, checking out each other’s cars, talking to track officials. Learning all the time.” He left out the obvious, that those people were the ones I sought out first thing Friday afternoon as we pulled into the track.

If I had been having fun the year before in hobby-stocks, then I was in my element in late-models. Just like in my business, I was networking, bullshitting, and learning. This

seemed right, I told myself, this could be a part of my life for years to come.

I had a few minor wrecks, half of them someone else's fault, some mine, the rest filed under 'that's racing!'. One evening, my wheels got tangled with someone else's after I hit a rut wrong. The Ford barrel-rolled into the spectator fence outside of the first turn.

My car came to rest right side up, straddling the fence, radiator blowing all over, a small oil fire from a ripped line. My arms had been flapping around during the rollover, for some reason I couldn't readily pull myself out of the cockpit to check on the car. I was dazed, the only thing I could think of was that there was something at the front clip of the car that needed my attention.

I'd fucked up big time, the suspension on both sides was stuffed up under the car. The EMTs were trying to get me into the ambulance. I was going, "Yeah, yeah—gimme a minute, I think we can fix this," and I pulled a piece of sheetmetal away from the wheelwell. Funny, my forearm moved along with the bodywork, I heard a kid scream. Turning toward the noise, I saw a bone sticking out of my driving suit.

I was still pretty stoned. I thought, shit, and pulled on my wrist with my good arm. That popped it back into the general area it belonged. Good, I announced, now let's look at the car. Another scream, I turned around, annoyed, this time the EMTs were losing their lunch.

Then I saw Dad and John, who had worked their way to the other side of my car. Upon looking at their faces, I was easily led into the back of the rescue squad. Now the shock hit, I wasn't sure if it was due to my arm or the car.

Fortunately, we were in Moberly, so it wasn't as if the folks had to drive all night to get to the hospital. Indeed, John and Marie were in the hospital room as the doctors stapled me back together.

At that juncture, if Decker had called Dad and me and said the car was totaled, I'm sure we would have turned to each another and said, "Well, that was fun," and gone back to running the stores. Racing would be a part of my past, something I'd moved on from. However, Robert's call assured me that the car could be ready as soon as my arm was. While it wouldn't be business as usual again, maybe that would be good, too.

So, I did my therapy, drank my milk, and in three weeks I was ready to go again. The first time back, the car broke about the time I did. The second week, I won at Adams County on Friday. Saturday, first again at Eagle in Lincoln. Sunday night, Greenwood, Nebraska, another win. Three wins in one weekend, that got me in the Post-Dispatch, and just about paid for the repair bill.

Throughout the pits, everyone said how I was driving better than before my injury, but of course I couldn't agree. "Driving on dirt, there are always going to be ruts, I can't always avoid them. So how can I be driving smoother?" I wondered out loud, and was surprised by how few people bought my modesty.

That included several people I hadn't met yet, as I was to find out the next spring. However, that winter, Decker called me up, informed me that he was selling his operation. Turns out his wife, the one making the money in the family, had been promoted and relocated to Atlanta. The added salary along with the sale proceeds would allow him to rebuild his

operation there. His decision was a no-brainer, I told him to get his ass moving. Call it loyalty or whatever, but I wasn't disposed toward jumping in someone else's car right away. I had won about ten features, I thought that I would take a step back and see what turned up.

On another front, it was becoming obvious that Pump 'n Run was beginning to take off. Soon me, probably Marie, and possibly Mom would be full-time entrepreneurs. It would be hard to rationalize another summer of raising hell.

Decker had a good shop in Marshall, the guy who bought it was in the same line of work, but he also had a sprint car lying around. He raced it before his wife had kids, and offered to sell it to me before I even thought I was interested in it. After a week or so, I agreed, providing that he'd maintain it. This would mean racing on both dirt and asphalt, also getting to the big tracks such as Odessa, Sedalia, and Knoxville. It would be something new to drive, although I couldn't do the sixty or so races I had the year before, the races I did attend would generate more visibility for the business.

Sprint cars are direct descendants of the cars that raced at Indy forty or so years ago, i.e., unstable, dangerous and viscerally fascinating to both drivers and fans. Although it could be argued that late-models are closer to the engineering standard of Winston Cup than sprints are to Indy cars, the fact is that sprints have more fan appeal than late-models. I was hoping that I wasn't drifting toward the macho side of the intellectual/ironman duality that is bullring racing, intending that my limited schedule would forestall that. But, before I'd even run the car, my plans changed.

In late March, I was in bed with a root canal, rationalizing using a Vise-Grip on the offending molar when the phone rang. The cashier from the store was calling; there was a Budweiser rep looking for me, would I like to come down?

John's diesel was first in the driveway, so I yelled up the stairs to their room, they were probably doing the twenty-minute workout trying for another kid.

"Yo, I'm taking the truck, want anything from the store?"

"Nah, they don't sell what I need," John called back as Marie laughed. I gathered up Theresa and drove the Kenworth to the store. As I came down Wabash, I looked for the Bud truck. Out in the boonies, the driver more often than not served as both delivery and sales, so there being no Bud truck was out of the ordinary. I pulled up to the fuel island, dumped the air, started the pump. As we ran into the store, I noticed a car out front with the unique St. Louis City tax sticker on the windshield. So there's his car, I thought, but doesn't our beer come out of Moberly? What the hell.

I walked in on the cashier and some guy in a three-piece. The suit looked at me, then at John's rig. "You drive K-Whoppers, too?" he began.

Before I could reply, the cashier piped up, "Hell, he can drive anything!" Thanks, I thought, and who is this?, introducing myself as the store manager.

"Aren't you the guy that drives race cars, too?" he insisted. What's this got to do with beer? He finally introduced himself as Gordon MacDonald, he worked for Anheuser-Busch and I'm still going, okay...

Then I realized that this was Gordon MacDonald, vice-president, sports marketing.

Anheuser-Busch, not Moberly Distributing. High-priced executive, not route salesman. Sugar Daddy.

I realized that I wasn't in a position to be talking with a potential sponsor, with Theresa on my hip and me in just a polo shirt and jean shorts. I seemed more worried than he was. We wandered outside, talked about the weather, John's truck, everything except my car and how good Budweiser would look on the rear wing.

A train passed through town, I pointed out the Manufacturers Railway cars, the ones carrying Bud out of St. Louis. He was impressed by that bit of inside baseball, also how I had merchandised his company's products and how we moved them out. I was appreciative, I didn't see how he could come across those kinds of sales figures without going to some trouble.

All during our conversation, cars along Wabash were honking and their drivers waving at me. "It seems that you have this town's attention," he allowed.

"Really, it's never like this," I said apologetically. I suggested that we head next door, I wanted dad to meet Gordon.

Behind my dad at the counter was the wall full of pictures and clippings, a modest amount of trophies, and, of all things, a Budweiser clock. Gordon had a kid-in-a-candy-store look on his face. This was like taking high school linemen through the Nebraska Cornhuskers' weight room and daring them to sign anywhere else. After a few howdys, we got down to business.

"What we are looking for," Gordon began, "is a driver and team to throw embarrassing amounts of money at," all we had to do was drive fast, wear Bud caps and not get caught drinking Coors or Miller.

I had been reading Circle Track Magazine, I knew Bud was looking to get into sprints. That meant that another vice-president was going to see some other driver, or perhaps Gordon was heading somewhere else after leaving me. Either arrogance or false modesty on my part was going to cost us this deal, also wreck our reputation with other sponsors. Two years of business classes were serving me well now.

"Any kind of deal on the level we both want can't be shook on here," I began. "I know how Anheuser-Busch works, you can't sign the checks all by yourself, which means that the people who do will want to see us sooner or later. Can we come down to St. Louis on Monday, meet with you again?" I didn't choose the words I used randomly. I liked a number of things about Gordon, without considering him being a race fan or a sponsor. Of course I was going to have to parley with his bosses, but I could make it seem that he was the one taking us to see them, rather than stepping over him. And since he would see his fellow vice-presidents before me, I had to impress him and make sure that feeling would be carried forward.

We agreed on Monday afternoon. I genuinely looked forward to meeting him again, but I had a lot of work to do in a short time.

In years past, if you didn't have a sponsor, you painted your car white, slapped your contingency decals on, and went racing. At the same time, you were also fishing, your lure being your big, noisy sponsor-me-white billboard. If you ran good, fine; if you ran bad, you

looked pitiful, soon you didn't run at all.

In big time racing, they refined the between-sponsor paint job. If you came into Daytona or Indy without the sponsor check in your hand, but had at least talked with them, you painted your car in the product or corporation's colors, leaving off the decals, giving a little free time to your potential dance partner. A racetrack owner told me once "there's no such thing as bad publicity," and while he wasn't too original, he had a point.

That afternoon, I hatched a plan to convert my sprinter into a Budweiser can, right down to the lettering. We were understandably subdued in our racing that night, once I got up into the feature I stayed out of trouble and finished about sixth. The last thing I needed to do was pull an all-nighter straightening a bent car. We spent Saturday coming up with the color scheme and finding the paint, on Sunday we shot the coat. The actual painting was easy, but since we didn't have access to dry-transfers, we had to cut stencils for all the lettering. When we finally looked up, it was after midnight Monday morning.

Drunk of lacquer fumes, Dad and I loaded up the hauler, got dressed up, and headed to St. Louis. I was in a confident mood, the worst that could happen would be for me to learn more about how the business side of racing worked, how could I lose?

I thought the meeting was going well, as much as I knew about these things. Gordon and the other executives were showed an assortment of clippings and track programs, we ran a video of me racing at Moberly that a film student at Missouri-Columbia had made for a project. They allowed that was out of the ordinary.

"If you like that, then come out to the parking lot and see what you think," I teased. Our group took the elevator to the lobby, walked across the lot, where our hauler was parked across six stalls. We rolled the car out, these high-priced executives climbed all over it, I hoped the paint wasn't tacky.

I looked nervously at Dad, then over at Gordon, who was in turn watching the other vice-presidents foaming at the mouth.

"That is really good detail work."

"I've seen this kind of 'spec' paint on Indy cars, but this--"

Dad was smiling, it was time for the salesman's son to close on the deal. "Well, I learned from experts." I wasn't lying when I said, "I think Bud looks good on it. You?"

They huddled, Gordon came over. "Want to meet with a bunch of lawyers?"

Finally. "Let's do lunch."

We adjourned to the Busch Stadium Club for lunch. My naiveté showed in one respect regarding my negotiations, I really hadn't thought about racing any more than what I had planned earlier. Anheuser-Busch had other ideas, though.

"We want to establish our presence in the Saturday-night, state fair crowd," they began. "We run the risk of alienating the, well, rural consumers if we just concentrate on Indycars, we find that as well even in NASCAR." I had heard this before, I read my magazines.

"What we'd like to see is you at Knoxville, IRP, Terre Haute, Salem, the big USAC races." My blood stopped flowing at that point, I was still thinking Moberly, Sedalia...though I hadn't thought of myself as a professional racer, apparently I was now...

"Sure, as long as I get to race near home once or twice," I countered, learning fast.

"I'm trying to sound modest, but I've got family, a few fans, too."

Not a problem. Just get on television and in the trade papers. Keep in mind where the cameras were, however.

By the time we got back home, Max Anschutz had received the contracts. A couple of signatures, a fax, a call from Chariton County Bank that they had received a wire transfer, and I was a contracted driver.

You always hear drivers saying something along the lines of "I'd do this for nothing," or "If the money disappeared, the real racers would still be here," or something equally noble. Well, that's real nice. My view at the time was, if someone pays my way, gets me reasonable equipment, allowed me the means to support myself, then I would go racing. In return, I'd be an ambassador for their goods or services; always giving value for money.

I wasn't going to pawn everything I had to go chase a dream that others valued more than me. If my little 'intellectual exercise' wound up costing my family in terms of their standard of living, my folks would be honest enough to tell me, but I hoped to God that I would have perceptiveness enough to figure it out by then. What Budweiser provided me was the means to take this 'exercise' to a higher level.

During the summer, I gravitated toward the races that were broadcast, with a little prodding from Anheuser-Busch. I didn't mind, a preponderance of the tracks were new to me. I'll admit, some I picked up easier than others, I won two races broadcast on ESPN from IRP on two successive Saturdays. I suggested tongue-in-cheek that ESPN come out to Missouri during the victory lane interview. With the help of a call from Gordon to Bristol, it just so happened that they could come out to the State Fair races in Sedalia. I was listening to a Cardinal game one evening, the station in Moberly ran an ad for the fair.

"...Two-headed calves, statistically safe midway rides, and Don Peterson driving the Budweiser sprint car Sunday night! Tickets going fast for the race broadcast nationwide on ESPN!" Hello.

The next day in the store, I found John balefully regarding a life-size cardboard cutout of me in my overalls and my car alongside. The Bud rep must have been by, I imagined one of these in every bar and package store in Missouri.

"...And fifty kids recognize their daddy. Welcome to the big time," John snorted.

Third week in July, I was in Du Quoin for a Saturday night race on TNN. This was a haul from Brunswick, so instead of Dad and John coming along, I towed the car myself, and arranged for a couple of locals to help in my pits. This was in and of itself no big deal, when I was racing in Oklahoma or South Dakota I could always count on some other driver from there to be racing in Sedalia, for example. His crew would be available, for a price, naturally.

I had made the feature comfortably, I was running at the tail end of the last chance race, making sure a steering arm we had to change was run in correctly. I was only figuring on running a lap or two, that should do it.

About ten cars in front, one guy got loose, overcorrected, and hit the outside wall a ton. I could see the change in the floodlights' reflection off the chainlink fence as he hit the support posts. He ricocheted back across the track, the back end hitting the end of the guardrail separating the track from the pit lane. That ruptured his fuel tank, as he spun in

the middle of the track, huge parabolas of fuel were flung out. One hit me across the face and chest like someone had caught me with a wet beach blanket.

Shit, I thought, it's going to take less than three seconds for that fuel to hit my exhaust manifolds, maybe my brake discs. I hit the engine kill switch for shits and grins, just then the fuel ignited, sucking the air from my lungs. No harm in hitting the brakes now, I reasoned, I popped the extinguisher and headed toward the fence.

I hit the wall, punched my belts, and leaped over the side of the car. You'd no doubt think holding your breath for about ten seconds wouldn't be a problem, but knowing your life depends on it, combined with the sensation that the belts aren't unhooking, your feet are catching on the pedals, and what is taking so long for the firemen to get here, all combine to make you panic. And try not to freak if you're on fire, I dare you.

I rolled a couple of times, then one of the officials whacked me with a shot of extinguisher powder. Prying my visor open, I willed myself to please take a breath. I could hear the otherworldly sound of other extinguishers going off up the track. One of the other drivers knelt down to see how I was, then I rolled over to look up toward the wreck. A huge pall of smoke and dust rose above the site, and all the emergency vehicles in southeast Illinois were gathered, lights flashing.

We walked back. A TNN reporter and cameraman came up, asking the usual how and why stuff. I remember telling my folks I was all right, but as to what happened, that was a blur. By then, I could see the other guy's car.

The initial impact with the outside wall had killed him instantly, his neck had broken. The fire hadn't touched him, my Nomex was actually worse off than his. Indeed, the car was mostly undamaged; cut off, bolt on. The State Police took over, kicking us off the track and back into the infield. My car was being unhooked, the crew surveying the damage.

"If this had happened first thing tonight, we could have put new wiring looms on and cleaned the induction, but--"

With few words, we pushed my car onto the hauler and secured it. I paid the guys, thanked them, drove across the back stretch and toward home. At the time, it was still an open question whether the race would be called off, but I had seen enough.

At the scene, I was probably still in shock, indeed the other drivers had been analyzing the wreck vocally out of nervousness. I had been one of them, too. But, the longer I drove, the more disgusted I got. At whom, I didn't know but I wondered if the guy had kids depending on him. I knew he had a wife or something, arrowing into my memory was an image of the driver being wheeled toward the fourth turn on a gurney, outside the fence a helicopter was warming up. Two women stood, their backs to me, dressed like most of the women in the pits who weren't actually working on cars—polo shirts and white slacks. One lady had her arm around the other, who had her hands to her face as the chopper started, no room to ride with him.

On an elemental level, the guy could not care less, but the old saw about 'he died happy' wasn't going to do a thing about mortgages. Or sons and daughters. At least in my position, though my family would miss me, I wouldn't leave any kids hanging. That really made me feel better, I sighed.

I got into Brunswick about four-thirty Sunday morning, leaning on the fender of the truck for the longest time, feeling the heat waft off the engine. No trains, no traffic on 24, no wind. But the action of my brain working double-time and the blood pounding in my ears made it seem as if the sky was screaming. What I need to do, and fast, is try and rationalize this, I guessed. 'Rationalize' wasn't the word, that sounded insulting. As if you could pigeonhole your husband dying?

I was startled to find Marie and John swinging on the porch. "You look like shit," Marie observed, not being funny. I wondered if they had seen my introspective moment out by the truck, of course there was no way they hadn't.

I rambled for a few minutes, or hours—the sun was coming up when I paused.

"Life has a way of killing people," John tried.

"Listen," Marie continued. "We were all watching tonight, this had to happen sooner or later. Anyhow, the only thing we could think of was, we're glad it wasn't you. That sounds shitty, but break it down. You'll just find another way to say it, and mean it. We'd be just as fucked as that guy's wife, but it'll happen to someone."

Marie looked at John, then me. "We all know what John hauls, any number of things could go wrong and we'd never find his body to bury him. I could ask him to stop, but why?"

"A tank car could derail downtown and none of us would ever wake up to know. No bargaining, no rationalizing, no apologies. It ain't your problem, anymore." John sighed. "I'm okay with that."

"Don't think 'what if'," Marie squeezed my hand. "The day everything makes sense to you, tell me and I'll call the state hospital."

The summer continued; USAC, Outlaws, dirt, asphalt, I told a reporter for Circle Track that "I'm too stupid to know the difference!" Anheuser-Busch was happy, they had a contract on the table for next season. In order for me to match that commitment, the next step would be for me to either buy a shop or build my own. A few chassis, engine shop, and for chrissakes, a public-relations department. I could hardly wait.

Pump 'n Run wasn't standing still, either. I was noticing that I walked around thinking about the 666 calls I had to return, and how great it would be to get into the cockpit, where it was nice and quiet!

Late August, and we headed up to Iowa, for the Knoxville Nationals. Three days of nonstop sprint car races, fifty grand to the winner of the feature on Saturday night. Even on the drive up, Dad and I were discussing the towns along the way, and their suitability for one of our stores.

For the weekend, Bud had a hospitality tent set up, and guess who was the main attraction? Even though I had a high-buck sponsor I was only at Knoxville for the beer, so to speak. I didn't pretend that I'd be running up with the full-time drivers, the ones who had been coming for years. Thankfully, Bud didn't expect it either. This year.

The writing was on the wall: My first year in sprints, only twenty- three years old, hell, even Cosworth instead of Chevy power. The first thing that furrowed my brow, and lots of others', was the fact that the first thing off the truck, I was fast. I kept waiting for the astronauts to get with it, but my speed got me third for the final. On both Thursday and

Friday, I won support races and prelims, still no problems.

On each of those nights, staring at the ceiling of the Super 8 room, I kept trying to psych myself down. The reality of being this good, so close to the final made me think too much. The last thing I wanted was to get overconfident and expect to go this good. While I was driving hard, I wasn't over my head, and I had expected at some time to reach a level where my experience and reflexes ran out. Especially with the cars and drivers present, I expected a driving lesson from, say, twenty-three other drivers on Saturday night.

But it never happened. After a good, hard, fair run in the Nationals, no one was more surprised than I to turn into Victory Lane. I was only passed once, re-passed quickly, and moved to the front within seven laps, and wasn't challenged at all in the last five. I thanked everyone who had shown me the slightest kindness.

So, with the car ticking on the trailer, John sleeping in the crew cab with the trophy in his arms, and a check for fifty Large in my pocket, we went back home. As we drove south on 65, every small town's high school football field was lit up, teams practicing deep into the night. That meant fall, winter, four months or so of hibernation, planning, rebuilding for next year. And, dammit, I'd have to be a fucking administrator this time. Spending Anheuser-Busch's money wisely, all the things I wanted to do for Mom and Dad, not anyone else.

I just wanted to drive. And basically what being the best sprint car driver in America meant was that you got a chance to do the same thing next year. There was nowhere else to go once you had won the Nationals. I'd eaten a lifetime's worth of dirt, and had my fill of being cut by gravel. While the other people in the pits were nice enough, I felt that my frame of mind wasn't right for coming back for more. Familiarity breeding contempt and all that.

Moreover, what was going to happen would affect my driving; a good bean-counter didn't necessarily make a good driver. I had seen enough drivers on the track that weren't focused, I didn't want to be one of them. I had learned a hard lesson in Du Quoin as to what happened if your attention wandered for just a second.

Someone would be writing in the trade papers that I had just driven the race of my life, maybe that was true, and everything else would be repetition. Or not—I couldn't pin down any one thing that I had done more of or better that weekend, that made it harder to resolve.

I turned toward Dad, he had a look on his face like he'd been expecting me to say what I did next.

"I'm quitting."

Back to the present. I beat the heaviest part of the storm home, coasting the Hertz into John's shed to thwart any hail. The wind whipped the rain into sheets, causing a roar inside the metal building. Robins pulled worms in the yard, Daniel and Theresa yelled across to me, counting lightning flashes and waiting for the thunder. Marie called us for supper, I allowed as to how the dining room would be crowded already, so I'd wait until the rain stopped and then eat.

Eight-thirty, I wandered into the kitchen, Marie was loading the dishwasher. The first round of storms had passed, now the sun was out for a moment. Steam was rising off the

blacktop, the heat and humidity hadn't passed yet. Combined with the fact that the wind still hadn't come around from the southeast, meant that it still could be a bumpy night. Dad and John were still on the Civil Defense storm spotter net, a scanner on Marie's counter top was testifying to the threat of more storms. In between updates, she prodded me for more details about Grace.

"Going to call your sweetie soon?" she smirked.

"If that's what you want to call her," I replied evenly, waiting for her next smartass comment. That wasn't long in coming.

"Y'know, John told me he tried phone-sex once, but he found the holes too small. You?"

"Well," as I armed the microwave, "I'm sure he appreciated the contrast with yours."

"Fuck you," she laughed.

Next morning, Grace texted me. *"Are you alone?"*

"Just me and my hound," I replied. Marie had taken the kids to Grandma's and wasn't in any hurry to come back to babysit me.

No reply for a minute, then the phone hummed and some photos arrived. Classic topless selfie in the bathroom mirror. Same on her balcony. An absolutely charming self-deprecating smirk in a few of them. Kissing a part of herself that I'd hadn't thought she could reach. On the couch with a disinterested Ginger. A few others, all beautiful.

"Nice pooch."

"Thanks! Ginger ain't too bad, either:-)"

"Snicker."

"Nothing you haven't seen before...but I didn't think you'd mind <3"

"Damn skippy. Lucky me. Thank you, made my day."

"Mine, too!"

The next four days were busier than I expected: The rain had made the plant site a quagmire, looking for a dry spot for the groundbreaking was a bear. On top of that, I met with the rest of the sales managers, took them around to the grocery stores in the vicinity. Executives from Co-Cola came up, I had to get them seen in the media. Friday, John helped us troubleshoot the trucks we'd bought, then the drivers came with us down to the rail yards to unload the trailers. Saturday morning, I made the sales manager at Moberly Ford cream his jeans when we leased twelve cars. By dinner Saturday night, we were on our way to reestablishing Coca-Cola's presence in northern Missouri.

Working in the mud all weekend had caused my ankles to act up, I showed up late at the folks' on Sunday morning, on account of my enjoying a leisurely bath. Naturally, Marie had heard me on the phone to Grace when she left earlier that morning, that apparently was the topic going around the table as I arrived.

"Don's been on the phone to Grace every night, for at least an hour at a time," Marie announced to the table.

Good thing the kids were outside. "So what? We're talking about business," I replied

vaguely.

“Balls,” the group replied as one.

“How serious are you two, really?” Mom asked.

“We’re serious until we aren’t,” I shrugged. “We’re both intelligent about it, it’s not like we’re in junior high or anything.”

“In other words, you haven’t gotten her into bed yet,” Dad quipped.

“Real close, but I wasn’t ready,” I let slip, sticking my nose into the sports section, awaiting the reaction.

“You lying son of a bitch,” John laughed, though the bitch in question was sitting next to him.

“I don’t want to go too fast,” I tried to explain, “and miss something.”

“What you’re missing are a few marbles,” Marie replied incredulously, glad to have a supportive audience.

“Whatever happened to finding out about her first?”

“You’ve been on the phone to her ever since you got here,” Mom noted. “You haven’t been talking about baseball, I hope.”

“Yeah, how well do you know her now?” Dad asked, and he had a point. I had no reply to that.

Marie piped up again. “Ricard isn’t until next weekend. You could get in a good two, three days of accelerated carnal knowledge. If you don’t call Delta, I will!” She pulled the phone over to the dining room table, as she set it down, it rang. She picked it up with a what-the-hell look on her face, listened for a second. “Well, hello, Simon,” she replied in an exaggerated English accent. He had come out to Brunswick last winter, on the way to Cali for testing and a PR video. Along with Brian, Marcel, Jan and Ken, eating good food for a change and letting some jet lag wear off. They all had Mom’s phone number.

What’s he calling for, I wondered, there had to be a good reason.

Marie handed me the phone. “Don, you’d better get back here,” the phone buzzing, but Simon’s concern evident. “The FIA has issued some new imperial edicts, apparently we’re going too fast. You’re going to be pissed, Ken sure is.”

Well, I did call the airlines, but not for the reason the folks wanted. John had to go to MCI anyhow, so he tagged along for the drive, this meant that I was dropping a St. Louis Hertz off in Kansas City, and not for the first time.

On the pond-hopper, I had time to reflect on the FIA and the politics of Formula One. Ever since two cars met on a road and decided to race, there had been one pompous individual or another ready to assume the ‘duty’ of regulating and promoting the sport. As racing became more popular, more money got involved, and this position became more necessary, or so it was assumed by those either in the job or wanting it.

FIA, the organization that runs world motorsport, is based in France and run by an idiot named Jean-Patrick Lacroix. J-P lists his nationality as ‘European’, all EU-ish, and vague enough to avoid scrutiny into his tax records. Lacroix allegedly oversees the FIA’s responsibilities, which include coordinating competition licenses between types of racing and

between various national sanctioning bodies. The FIA also regulates the specifications, or formulae, of various classes of international racing series. Groups like NASCAR, Outlaws, and drag racing are essentially self-regulating, with no aspirations to expand outside of North America, therefore no threat to Lacroix's security. FIA is more concerned with Formula One, Formula 3000, Group C (sports cars, Le Mans), as well as rallies.

Certainly, regulation is important, or else Formula One would become a full-blown, damn-the-expense technical demonstration, like NASA on wheels. What has to be considered, however, is not to deter teams from gaining an advantage when they follow the existing rules, using their intelligence. In the period from the fifties to the late sixties, the sport enjoyed steady growth and popularity, with stable rules. Beginning with the mid-seventies, engine manufacturers began to enter Formula One with turbocharged engines, electronic engine management systems, and telemetry. At the same time, aerodynamicists began scrutiny of low-drag, high-downforce solutions to car design. The cars began to be constructed of carbon fiber, lighter, safer and stronger than the previous aluminum-magnesium designs.

These measures had the effect of raising the bar in terms of car preparation and design, so private owners and gentleman racers became passé. All of this was also more expensive to produce, which in theory would have caused the smaller teams to drop out. Well, Ken's was a small team then, and he's still at it!

Nevertheless, Lacroix was elected to the presidency of the FIA, on a platform of cost-cutting and improving the show. Immediately, he consolidated his power, eliminated pesky committees and oversight agencies. One of the rationales he gave was that Formula One needed 'dynamic' leadership to guide it through this period of rapid growth, leadership that couldn't be bound by cumbersome bureaucracies.

Sounded awfully dictatorial to me, I thought from my aspect in the Brunswick High library. Within months, ground-effect technology had been choked off (though any smart designer worked around it), design innovations were emasculated or banned, turbo boost limits were carried out, and fuel amounts lowered.

Instead of lowering costs and closing up the field, high-priced R and D teams and two-hundred person engine departments became the rule. Surprise, the same teams generally made up the front of the field.

There was a general feeling among Formula One teams that Jean-Patrick was setting up his rule changes to favor the big European automobile manufacturers—Ferrari, Renault, Alfa Romeo. This to the detriment of the pure racing teams: Lotus, McLaren, and of course Hazlett. Personally, when I came over to Europe, I thought this was a little paranoid. But I was shown the relation between R and D and the major car builders, who could to afford the mega-bucks to write off and claim new engines as new product research.

Companies like Ford, Honda and the German autobuilders were more pragmatic in their approach: They focused on what they knew best—engine design—and let the British-based teams develop chassis and aerodynamics to mate with their powerplants.

And then the reason for Lacroix's complicity became clear: He was receiving kickbacks in the form of entry fees from the manufacturers in the minor formulae. Hazlett or Lotus

could give a shit about Formula 3000 or Group C, but Fiat (Ferrari), among others, could, and did funnel large amounts into those series.

J-P hid the changes behind the guise of increased safety, but the truth was that drivers were getting killed with the same relative *infrequency* as before he showed up. This was a credit to the changes in design philosophy the British 'garagistas' came up with, only coincidentally these teams at the forefront of ground-effects were beating the 'classical' Ferraris and Alfas. To wit, the very areas Lacroix tried to rule out were the ones credited with making the cars safer.

And, like Simon told a television interviewer once, "Ken and I have been involved in racing for ages, and I've yet to see this 'closer competition' that Lacroix aims for. Indeed, more often than not, there is a race at the front, but there has never been twenty cars nose to tail. And never will."

Which comes to the case of the Hazlett-Ford combination, and how ours became the cars to have. Auto manufacturers come and go in the sport, beholden to marketing plans. Ford's current foray has lasted five years, while Ferrari has been the only team that run cars ever since F1 began after the war. As Simon mentioned, ever since the tobacco money showed up, usually one team at a time has gotten it right and produced cars that are so much better than the others, by seconds a lap. But it takes years for this to happen, Hazlett—and Ford—had to go through last year where we earned ten poles only to have the engines blow during the race. Last year, the races I won were the only ones I finished. But on occasion, a team with two hares take points off each other and allow a tortoise to win not only races but the championship.

Not us, not this year. The Fords are finally bulletproof, they're fast, torque all throughout the rev band, disgustingly great gas mileage. There's no faster car in a straight line, and we're pretty good in slow corners. And I'm good. Jan's getting there and that's beautiful to see. We know our roles. I have to prove every day that I'm worthy of my beautiful car.

Am I going to apologize for all the advantages we have? Not on your life. I've put in my time, and seen enough of the other end of things.

Jan was waiting for me at Heathrow, with a group of reporters. Unlike in the States, I get mobbed in the Old World. Security had let Jan up the stairs to the jetway, so we met the press as a team.

"Guys," I preempted, smiling like I had seen it all before, "I haven't seen what's causing all the fuss, but it looks like ol' J-P stepped on his dick. Again." The group roared, not because I'd said something brilliant, but because I confirmed their impressions.

"I'm going up to the works and go over this screed thoroughly. Come up tomorrow and we'll do this right." I wanted to publicly give Jean-Patrick the benefit of the doubt, even though it was clear to me that he was trying to bend us over again.

We jumped into Jan's new Mustang GT, the first year in forever that they'd been imported from the U.S. Impetuous youth, one reflection of our age difference is in the cars we drive. His GT is a real road warrior, unlike the boring grocery-getters I drive.

Next morning, the principals of the team sat in the cafeteria as Ken passed the official memorandum around. While I was working on about two hours sleep, my mood wasn't noticeably different from anyone else's.

Bill Moore, Ford's motorsports man in Europe, was at the table, too. Sanjay came in, the meeting began.

"Jean-Patrick released this to the press at a Group C race at Vallelunga Sunday," Ken began. "Real act of courage, considering it wasn't at a Formula One weekend and he sent it to the press first."

This was a decision of the Executive Council for Safety, it was explained. This august body was made up of Jean-Patrick and a couple of his toadies, one of them from Sierra Leone, of all places, lots of racing and car building going on there. Since it was in the interest of safety, these wide-ranging measures were not open to discussion, not eligible to be voted on.

"Shit, look on the bright side," Brian said sarcastically. "At least we can grandfather our cars until the end of the year!" Marcel gave him a one-finger salute.

"Okay, point one," Ken began. "Ten centimeter reduction in sidepod length, ten in width."

"Wonderful," Sanjay shook his head. "Less protection for the driver."

"Two. Regulations setting a minimum amount of vertical wing area, relative to the total wing area."

"I'm no engineer," Jan admitted, "but I see a hole in that rule a mile wide."

"Sure, what he wants us to do is run lots of wing, make the cars suck more wind, but I can get around that. Run the whole wing at an attack angle of about one-thousandth of a degree, and he can go to hell." Sanjay really hated people meddling in his province, politicians were good for something, he allowed, but not for anything he dealt with.

"He should have made it 'minimum non-horizontal'," Marcel noted, "but he'd then be mistaken for a real engineer."

Ken read more bullshit, limits on the amount of tire sets per weekend, reducing the time allowed for practice. Yakety yak, J-P must be paid by the word. Give Sanjay a month and a few million dollars, he'd make up the downforce and speed that J-P wanted to take away. And so would every other team.

But..."Now this is the good one. A prohibition on turbo-charged, supercharged or forced induction engines, to be replaced by three-point-five liter engines, normally aspirated."

Jesus. I took a look at Bill, and saw the face of a man who'd just seen one-hundred million dollars of mostly non-transferable race technology become obsolete at the end of the year. Damn. No wonder the press was so bad back at the airport.

Lowering costs, my ass.

Bill stomped off in a righteous huff soon after the meeting degraded into hurling epithets at Lacroix. He had to craft his own statement, or have Dearborn do it. I turned to Ken. "I sorta laid on a press conference for noon, if you mind, I can move it to the airport or somewhere else?"

"Oh, God no," he gasped in mock horror. "Miss one of your press lunches? Give them

hell, anything you say is okay with me.”

“All things equal, I’d rather be in a car designed by racing people than one that was pulled out of Lacroix’s ass,” I ranted. As usual, my meeting was going great, though I was unhappy about the circumstances.

Some of the reporters were great straight men: “Don, let’s hear your views on these new engine regs.”

“Listen, I’ll bet you a six-pack that Ferrari already has a V-12 three-five on their dynamometer.” The European press loves my Americanisms. “If the manufacturers can’t beat the British on the track, well, they have a sympathetic...ear in J-P.”

Lacroix had a flunky in the crowd: “It’s supposed to be for safety reasons.”

“Sure it is. What really happened is that Renault and Ford and Honda figured out turbos, while Ferrari couldn’t.”

“I’ve got an open mind,” I continued. My tone turned arch, some of the writers smiled. “You tell me how a three-five is supposed to be safer than the old three liter engines the turbos replaced? If that rat doesn’t have a Testarossa in his garage already, you can bet that one is on the way.

“I’m willing to engage him on the finer points of physics and race car engineering,” I allowed graciously. “If we can’t see eye to eye, then he can cheerfully kiss my butt, I’ll even give him first choice of cheeks.”

The first race of Lacroix’s presidency was the Argentine Grand Prix ten years ago. At the first corner, a Lotus and Ferrari both went for the same piece of track, the resulting contact precipitated a five-car wreck and caused the race to be red-flagged. Most of the other drivers and crew shrugged it off and got the spares ready, the replay showed it to be a typical first-corner cluster-fuck. The race was run, no one had any further problems, everyone was looking forward to Brasil the next week.

That Thursday night, the teams were nestled in the Sao Paulo Hilton resting for the race weekend. A note was slipped under the Lotus team manager’s door. It was on FIA letterhead, and it informed Simon Thrasher, then Lotus’ manager, later Ken’s, that his driver had been adjudged to be guilty of causing the accident in Bluenose Aires. Lacroix’s signature was nowhere to be seen, just the ‘safety committee’ which of course was the same difference.

Simon was ready to skyhook the manifesto into the nearest trash can, until he read the final paragraph. “It is the judgment of the Safety Committee that the Lotus driver is to be barred from competing in Brazil, furthermore placed on probation for the rest of the season.”

I don’t think so, Simon thought to himself, as he left his suite. He stopped by his opposite number at Ferrari, an agreeable man named Danilo Zancana, who holds the same position today. Simon was sure that Danilo hadn’t bitched to FIA, that was confirmed by him, he was as bemused as Simon was. Just then, the Ferrari driver involved in the crash happened by, and got a look at the note.

That guy went nuts, slamming doors and stomping off down the hall. Simon decided

to try and find Lacroix, a job made easier when the Ferrari man kicked in Lacroix's door. Simon made it into the room to find J-P being held by the lapels of his pajamas!

"How dare you pull this shit?" the driver screamed. "I've got to fucking race against those guys!" Simon moved (slowly) to break them up, Lacroix sputtering and wetting his pants.

After a while, everyone calmed down slightly. "It's hard enough out there without morons like you screwing around with us," Zancana berated Lacroix. "Let us do the goddamn racing, you can go play with yourself for all I care. Just stay off the track."

Simon was taken by the Ferrari men's concern. They could get no advantage from supporting Simon, the point was that Ferrari wasn't going to gain a whole lot from backing Lacroix, either. That being the case, sportsmen were going to stick together.

Simon raised holy hell against the FIA bureaucracy next day, getting Lotus' lawyers involved, and managing to get the suspension lifted. But the whole episode left a foul stink in the paddock, as the British teams began to perceive that the FIA was showing favor to the manufacturers. Sure, Enzo Ferrari had always sniffed at the "tinker toy" teams, ignoring that they won the majority of the races. But until now, there hadn't been a case of blatant favoritism from the FIA.

There was more to come, however, as I eagerly followed the goings-on from home.

The next year, the 'constructors' had ramrodded a rule through requiring drivers to sign 'loyalty oaths' with their teams, sort of like the reserve clause in baseball. The rationale, as the 'grande'es' made it up as they went along, was to promote stability in the teams and to keep drivers from moving from team to team when a better offer came up.

This had nothing to do with breaking contracts, most drivers would have no intention on going back on either written or handshake deals. The more cynical members of the British press decided the rule was to keep Ferrari drivers from jumping to McLaren or Williams once the British teams figured out each round of rule changes!

As I reflected at the time, you can't legislate mediocrity, but that was what the FIA wanted to do. For some reason, most of the British teams, including Hazlett, went along with the plan. Ken had a decent excuse, he had just landed a sponsor who wasn't paying for the cars to sit.

Therefore, the drivers staged a strike before practice in South Africa. For a bunch of millionaires, the drivers looked like stone socialists, 'uniting against the oppressors' and all that. As the first day of qualifying came and went, with no cars on the track, the team owners and race organizers became antsy. Negotiations were secretly begun to get the drivers back in the cockpits, agreement reached Saturday afternoon, when qualifying should have been taking place.

The final hurdle was cleared then the owners, the 'constructors' included, went to the FIA and asked Lacroix to rescind the license requirements. He agreed, citing a lack of popular support for the 'proposed' rule. A strange change in his behavior, since he never worried about a plurality before.

With that, the race was on, but as the cars crossed the line Williams-McLaren-Renault, Lacroix announced that the British teams and their drivers had been excluded from the

results, J-P falling back on a 'conduct detrimental to the sport' excuse.

Some detriment, the three cars had swapped the lead the entire afternoon, the press agreed it had been the race of the year. Despite the fact that the Renault drivers had been in the forefront of the boycott, they weren't penalized.

Now it was war between the British and European factories. Thrasher and the rest of the heads of the English teams were convinced that J-P was in bed with the Continentals.

The race after South Africa was at Imola, and the British delegation decided that they'd give it a pass, they would see how FIA liked a six-car race between the 'constructors'. It turned out to be a ten-car one, as some of the lesser English teams, Hazlett included, got skittish and threw in with FIA. These late additions had no bearing on the result, a one-two for Ferrari. The Tifosi had no problem with the race, Imola being Ferrari's home track, but the sponsors, including Ferrari's, were pissed. They wanted a competition between cars and drivers, not between lawyers and politicians.

And it promised to be a long summer, too. The English teams versus FIA; FIA against the Royal Automobile Club of England, who organized the British Grand Prix; all citing 'restraint of trade'.

Parallel to that, the British teams began negotiations with track owners to begin a shadow championship, but since Lacroix had the tracks in his pocket, the search was harder than expected. The tracks that were found, the drivers weren't thrilled to be driving on. Conversely, the teams had the rights to the television coverage.

Again, from my viewpoint, it looked like Formula One had become too bloated and incestuous to survive. Drivers and engineers were hopping planes to America in droves to run Indy cars, with that series' stable rules, administrators who were racing people, shitloads of money, and the Indy 500.

If the Formula One sniping went on much longer, there wouldn't be anything left to fight over. Just before Monaco, Philip Morris, Michelin, and ELF, the French oil giant, got together and announced that they would preemptively hold Formula One hostage, denying both sides the benefits of their sponsorship and participation. That got everyone's attention, without those companies, Formula One would be about as financially appealing as mud racing.

Grudgingly, the parties got together and lashed together a package of relatively stable and intelligent proposals for the direction of the series. The fact that this agreement had so many loopholes in it was of no consequence, at least the sponsors were convinced the parties involved all knew about them, and tacitly understood them!

Since then, there hasn't been an overt war again, however Lacroix has tried incremental bullshit like the continued restriction of the engines. This has turned most of the teams, all the drivers, the media and almost all of the money over to the side of the English. FIA now is regarded as a boil on the ass of rational, ordered growth. But, one that can ultimately be dealt with, or condescended to. The cars keep getting faster and safer, generally Formula One gets more popular, thwarting Lacroix's efforts to put sand in our crankcase!

“So, what good does the FIA do?” Grace asked me when I called that night. “If they’re so ineffectual, why don’t the constructors police themselves?”

“The constructors, if there is no common enemy, could possibly turn on themselves,” I tried to explain. I mentioned the times when Hazlett had jumped over to the Ferrari side of the war. “The teams could spend a lot of money and time, eventually get rid of the FIA, but there would then still have to be some administration. The people in that position would be susceptible to the same temptations that J-P gave in to.

“I can’t blame him for being human, I guess. I just wish he wanted to run tiddlywinks competitions or something.”

“You gave him a colostomy today, it sounded,” Grace mentioned.

“It’s funny what leading the championship will do to a debate,” I reminded her. Fuck you, J-P, I’m rich. “On a perverse level, I make him money. If Formula One has no virtuosity or personality, then no one will watch the broadcasts, he doesn’t get his skim.” I don’t like to brag, but I would rather him leave the sport to professionals like us. Then I would gladly keep my self-aggrandizing to myself.

As my mind wandered back to Grace snug in her house, sitting on the same couch that we’d had so much fun on last week, I couldn’t help thinking that there were fewer problems then.

“I’m not going to get moldy, Don,” she reassured me when I made a half-hearted attempt to explain further why I had dropped everything and headed back to London. “I’m just going to relax, knowing you want to be with me, and that you will come back. That’s all I need,” she sang, though she left hints about what could happen...

Still, it was crunch time in Formula One, with France and England on consecutive weekends. Trucks were being readied for the trip to the channel ferry tomorrow. Coupled with an obligation to appear on Ford’s behalf the Monday after Silverstone at a car show in Germany, another show in Detroit Tuesday, then a meeting with Sola Stella in Dallas, it would be the better part of two weeks before I’d see her again.

“So, two weeks without visiting the old petting zoo,” Grace sympathized. “What is the world-famous race car driver going to do?”

“Nothing left to do except stomp the shit out of the rest of the teams,” I supposed. “Hazlett-Fords love fast tracks, and J-P can’t legislate us any more this year, at least!”

I honestly tried to quit sprint cars, really I did. The first month of my retirement was spent fending off offers from other car owners, trying to sell off the sprint car, and basically vegetating. That winter, Marie and John adopted a boy from a Korean relief agency, I had two niece/nephews to bounce on my knees.

It was in that position that I met a stream of reporters from the trades. My win at Knoxville had shaken sprint car racing, the biggest upset in recent history. Everyone wanted to know who Don Peterson was, and where was Brunswick, Missouri? That shock hadn’t worn off when I announced I was giving sprints up, that brought another influx of stringers and video crews into town.

I was more of a novelty at the Marshall store than I was a benefit, hordes of both

writers and locals incredulous that I'd just walk away. That was their problem, it wasn't my fault that my decision wasn't in their plans.

As the new year arrived, my old buddy Gordon from Anheuser-Busch came into the store, we seized a booth and caught each other up, he clucked appropriately at the pictures of Daniel. He wasn't going to be around much anymore, he announced presently.

I hoped my bailout hadn't made it frosty around Pestalozzi Street, I wondered.

"No, not at all," he assured me. Rather, he had been promoted to Los Angeles, to work on Pacific Rim marketing. He also was temporarily overseeing sports promotion in Southern California.

"Budweiser is putting together a sprint car series in the Los Angeles area, in late March-early April," he announced.

I had studied Morse code in high school, I knew what he was telegraphing. "Go on," I replied, overly melodramatic.

"If I had Don Peterson's name on the entry list, I'm sure there would be more interest in it, more crowds, more cars."

"If I were, hypothetically, to run a race or two, what makes you think that would be an incentive to give up all of this?"

"I was hoping you'd help an old friend out. We'd pay your way out there, an embarrassingly handsome per diem, you keep all your winnings."

"If I were to go, remember,"

"Of course. If you were to go." He looked over the rims of his glasses.

"Shit, I'm retired," I protested, but I smiled at his display of persistence. "But, my car hasn't been looked at since last fall. I suppose if you had a chassis—Cosworth motor, of course...and the folks need a vacation..."

"Done."

Gordon leapt up from his seat in the booth. He never needed a signature from me on a contract, and I guessed the way he hugged me sufficed for a handshake.

The folks and I flew out to the coast for a break from the bleary winter. Despite the fact I'd hardly been out of Missouri, and never been on an airplane, Los Angeles didn't intimidate me. I would have rather driven out, but Budweiser wasn't paying me to get stuck in a snowstorm somewhere in New Mexico. I immediately discovered that I liked flying commercial aviation—people watching but also the science, discipline and occasional improvisation involved in the enterprise.

As far as I was concerned, there were no sights I needed to see in El Lay. I had a job to do, the description stayed the same whether I was in Moberly or California.

I didn't have many things I wanted to get accomplished, as a matter of fact. Go in, do my job, smile a lot and be gracious. This was the conversation at the front desk of the hotel once we checked in:

Clerk: "Anything else we can do, just let us know."

Me: "Closest Pizza Hut?"

Clerk: "They deliver, it's easier."

Me: "Titty bar?"

Clerk: "Ask the parking attendant. They can get a good cab for you, too."

Me: "Thanks, I'm set." Then to the folks, "See you at the track!"

We were racing primarily at Ascot Raceway, long since land-raped into another industrial park. The palm trees outside of the track were a little unusual, but the gravel bruises and the ruts in the road felt the same. I won a prelim in my first week, and a feature on my second Wednesday.

That Thursday, the Formula One cars came to town, rather, to Long Beach. I had made noises to Gordon that I'd be receptive to some paddock passes, since Bud was also the title sponsor for the Formula Atlantic support race, it made sense to the executives.

Gordon hooked me up, Thursday night found me in a suit and tie at a Budweiser dinner with the principals of Bud's team in the Atlantic race. The team owner, Roy Nicholson, seemed a bright sort, despite his open shirt and hair plugs. Tim Marshall, his driver, had a sense of humor like mine and let me talk his ear off.

Next morning, I wound my way through the paddock, my full access pass letting me into the Civic Center to watch the Formula One cars undergo their last-minute preparations. Maybe ten people in Los Angeles knew where I was, so I was puzzled when I was paged to the Budweiser tent.

Gordon and Roy Nicholson ran up quickly when they spotted me. "Tim just had one of his retinas detach," Roy said to me. "We were at Firebird last week, he hit a curb wrong, apparently. None of us thought much about it, but, shit."

That was a new one to me, certainly I'd bounced around on dirt enough to at least hear of it before. Ah, well, you live and you learn.

Tim was convalescing at UCLA, but there was no question about him racing this weekend. "Tough deal," I sympathized. "You got a paddock full of rent-a-drivers, is one of them going to get a call?" Too early for my mental radar to be working, I guess, because I about shit when Gordon opened up his mouth.

"We'd sort of like to ask you if you'd like to give it a try."

What? "No fucking way," I sputtered. That was just stupid. "Are you on drugs? I've never sat in a formula car, never driven in anything but a bullring, and—"

"So your answer's no, then," Nicholson summarized.

"Well...what...why are you teasing me? I'd wreck your car, the SCCA would shoot me, and Budweiser would castrate both of us." I looked over at Gordon, he didn't seem to be agreeing with my assessment, now that I had mentioned it.

"I do owe him a favor," Gordon allowed to Nicholson.

I couldn't believe it. There was just no way this would ever work. Besides, the SCCA would never buy it. This was the subject of a friendly, low-key argument at their tent. The thrust was to find any reason possible to keep me off the track, something I didn't disagree with entirely! Hopping into a Ralt-Ford wasn't the same as beating one of Decker's rent-a-wrecks around Marshall.

"You have any qualifications?" one of their executives asked; I didn't take it as an insult.

"One year NASCAR late models, one year sprint cars," I offered.

“Who all do you have licenses with?”

“USAC, NASCAR, World of Outlaws.”

“Hell, we’ve got reciprocity with all of them, but no one ever uses it,” one of them mentioned to the other officials.

“Race wins?”

“More wins than wrecks, how’s that?” I could feel a smile starting, and was on the balls of my feet by now—*can you top this?*

“Okay, how about championships?”

“Track champion at Moberly with late models, Knoxville Nats.”

“Jumping Jesus, *that* Don Peterson,” another one blew out a breath. “Well, that means an exemption from our rookie program.” A murmur rose from the group, which had expanded to include a few journalists, members of other teams.

“Listen,” I said with an enthusiasm that surprised me. “Got a deal. I’ll use all of practice and qualifying as my rookie test, it I so much as clip a wall, hasta la vista. Whatever time I record, throw it out and I’ll start from the back.” Like I wouldn’t be back there anyhow.

They couldn’t argue with that logic. True to Nicholson’s word, my overalls and helmet arrived, a guy from Stand 21 Racegear plied me with complimentary underwear, gloves and firesocks. AGV wanted to get me a helmet, but I already had one of theirs...There wasn’t time for me to get a seat fitting for the car, I had to make do with Tim’s. In formula cars, you wear the car, rather than ride in it, a proper seat is essential. We spent some time adjusting the pedals, then it was time to head out onto the track. Thankfully, I didn’t kill the engine. It was the middle of untimed practice, the other teams were in for their first adjustments, I had the track to myself for a few minutes.

Both a sprint car and a formula car are broadly the same, that is, they have four wheels. A vast sector of the population couldn’t tell the difference, or care. That’s okay, there are a lot more important things in life. But for my part, I certainly understood the difference, and I liked what I felt. The fucker stuck in the corners, ripped my neck off under acceleration, and popped my eyes out under braking. It was like the Ralt was trying to impress me, as I could appreciate the experience.

As much as anyone who had been in the cockpit for five minutes could, I felt at home. I had spent years reading about open-wheelers, after the rush of adrenaline was over, I didn’t become afraid. I knew what the car was going to do next. Damn, it felt good, and all the enthusiasm I had lost the fall before was back. But better, I felt as if the pedals were connected to my legs just as my feet were, the steering wheel part of my hands.

I pulled into the pits after about ten laps or so, Nicholson had made sure I had just a splash of gas in the car, and told me to keep an eye on the fuel pressure. That time-honored method of making sure I came back with his car! The engineer leaned in, I suggested changes to the car. He was smiling when I began talking, that was replaced with a look of concentration as my descriptions continued. Soon, he began to nod along, as if he expected Tim to be saying the same things.

After too short of a time, we were yanked off the track to make way for Formula One practice. I sat in Bud’s hospitality suite, trying the hotel to find Dad. He’d taken Mom down

to TJ for God knows what, every hour I checked in. In between, I went back out on the deck to watch the big boys run. It's a given that racing is usually noisy as hell, but it can also get quiet, when the cars are out on the back forty and there's no commentator rattling on. Then one single car blows by, and you can almost hear the individual valves moving, the crankshaft turning, the exhaust pulsing. God, I was out there a few minutes ago, those guys had to deal with the same things I had to, correct the same slides, run up the gearbox down Shoreline, like I did.

That evening, the folks finally rolled in as I was leaving for Ventura County. I just had a minute, but Dad could tell how excited I was by the fact that I could hardly talk fast enough to be coherent! That happens occasionally, I just say that my brain is moving faster than my mouth ever can.

Saturday morning, I set a time that would have stood for fourteenth if I hadn't already agreed to go to the back of the grid. My speed generated somewhat of a sensation on pit road, but I shrugged it off. "Duh, a car's a car, right? I go and drive fast, okay, boss?" In reality, I was enjoying myself, hard to think I'd been so tentative the morning before. I had something to learn, a new skill to develop, that always makes me happy. The folks came to the track, though there was hardly anything to see, me zipping past every ninety seconds or so, or pulling into the pits to talk to the engineers.

Immediately after practice, I had to leave for Ascot, my last-ever sprint race. I had fulfilled my promise to Gordon and then some, generating shitloads of press for Budweiser. Already I regarded the sprint car like a Tour de France rider would a tricycle, a focus of many memories but belonging to another time. Sprint cars and I said goodbye to each other in the most perfect way, I won my last race.

This was better than the ride home from Knoxville, I was surrounded in victory lane by racing folk, drivers I'd met and reporters wishing me luck. And now I had a clear direction to what I wanted out of racing, rather than just running like hell away from it. I happily told Gordon what he could do with his sprint car!

On the way home that night, Dad observed, "since you got into that Atlantic car, you haven't mentioned once about 'going back home and trying this or that at the Pump 'n Run'." He said it without inflection, not disappointed or anything. But yeah, when I visualized myself in a racing car, it was one of these, rather than an old sedan or sprinter. Therefore, obviously a clean break from the stuff back home.

Mom added, "And at least he won't be spending any of our money," I laughed, leaning back in the seat.

"Don't jump the gun. What if I stink up the track tomorrow?"

"You're not going to," Dad said.

Before the race, Roy and I went to the front-runners to introduce myself, and ask them what side of the track they'd like me to move to when they passed me! I also noted the color schemes of the cars, so I could spot them quicker. I anticipated getting lapped at least twice, and I didn't want to screw up in front of Gordon's people.

At the standing start, I took it extremely easy, the safety car almost passing me down Shoreline, but I was able therefore to dodge the cars that hadn't made the corner.

I moved up, picking off the odd car along the way, paying more attention to my mirrors, waiting for the leaders to appear. They'll be there any time. In the interim, I kept out-braking others going into the hairpin, the brakes were extremely good, building my confidence. I enjoyed the Gs that I got applying them, experimenting with how hard I could brake without locking them up. I also got a kick from stomping on the gas turning onto Shoreline, letting the car scream, the longest time I'd ever gone in a race car without lifting. There wasn't time to wire my helmet for a two-way radio, or else the team would have heard me yelling and laughing.

Pretty soon, I ran out of cars ahead to focus on, then I noticed my mirrors filling up with the fast cars. Fun's fun, I thought, but it was time to move aside for the train. But they weren't getting closer, before I could wonder much about that, I caught a glimpse of the checker flying, the corner workers waving yellows to indicate the race was over. Over? I was more than a little let down, I had just gotten started!

I nudged into the pits, met by slaps on my helmet and high-fives, and was pulled out of the car with gusto by Roy and Gordon.

"How'd it feel?" they whooped.

"How's it supposed to? Where did I finish?"

"You mean you weren't watching your pit board?" Roy asked incredulously. Damn, I forgot. That pissed me off a little, it was stupid of me to forget.

Gordon got a smug look on his face. "Can I tell him? Sixth place, lead lap, second-fastest lap."

"Bullshit."

They showed me a Longines-Olivetti printout, sure as hell, there it was. I fell onto the car in disbelief.

"Jeez, it's a good thing he wasn't watching his board," Roy muttered, smiling.

The folks came up to hug me, I grabbed a shower and sat with them in the Bud suite. Roy and Gordon sidled up to us.

"Well, have Ferrari and Williams been up here yet?" they asked.

"Told them they couldn't afford me," I laughed, quieter than you might expect, coming down from the excitement. I felt good; I hadn't been intimidated by anything, and I had done better than I had dreamed.

Another man came over to the table. Smiling, I turned to meet him as Roy introduced us. "Don, Robin Holcomb, Ford SVO." Robin held out a hand, then a business card.

"How you feel?"

"Beats working for a living, I suppose."

The Formula One cars were going off on their formation lap, we found seats to watch the race.

"I won't screw around," Robin began, "after that drive, Ford wants you, Roy here wants you, and of course Bud has wanted you. Naturally, we're not the only ones, but if you are interested in Atlantics, we really want you to be with us.

"I didn't spend hours planning this, obviously; your drive just now convinced me that we don't need to."

Yes. Don't be stupid, Don, you can do this.

"Come back to Texas with us," Roy offered. "I'm sure that Gordon and Robin can draw up something, in the meantime, you can look over my shop. Not another race until Detroit, eight weeks. There's lots of time to decide, consider it a vacation?"

Don, meet Destiny. "Okay, I'll see you," I shook hands with them. "But first, I'm going to find a driving school. I need to find out how to drive these things!"

I spent another week out on the coast at Skip Barber's school, learning the physics behind the impressions that I had encountered at the race. I had to unlearn techniques learned in oval racing, such as booting the accelerator and going through corners sideways. Again, I had an advantage in that I had been reading and watching road racing for years, so out-braking, clutching and engine braking were not foreign to me.

Tim Marshall met me upon my arrival at DFW, after lunch he drove me up to his double-wide in Roanoke. I kept my opinions about trailer homes to myself, because this one seemed different from the tornado magnets back in Brunswick. Tie-downs, satellite dish out back, brand new Ford out front. He told me he had a room I could use for the time being, also he'd been checking apartment complexes in town. Even though I wasn't bound to live near Roy's shop, I felt it politic to stay nearby, to avoid getting a big head about my new ride.

I thought I was a Ford fanatic, but I was in the weeds compared to Tim. His vanity plates read 'GM SVX', he had a dog named Edsel. I thought about looking on his acreage for Mustangs or Pintos...only to be startled by Tim yelling at the television: "Fuck GM, ya damn Chevy piece of shit," as a Cadillac commercial came on. "Corpse by Fisher," he sneered at the screen.

I was enjoying this, regardless of how I felt about the General, I appreciated his zeal. Tim gave me a goofy look, I smiled and shrugged. "You scratch the bed of a GM pickup, it says 'Coors'!" he chortled.

For someone who had been sort of forced to accept me into his team, he was apparently glad to have me around. I'm sure he felt he was still the best driver in the team, if not in Atlantics, and my arrival couldn't change that. He could therefore afford to be magnanimous; whatever I learned from him wouldn't diminish his skills.

(I wouldn't spend a lot of time worrying about how Tim did after having his team expanded to accommodate me. He won Indy this year. In a Chevy-powered car.)

We drove over to Southlake, to Team Nicholson's shops. Kenworth hauler being washed out front, five Ralt-Cosworths being worked on inside. Roy met us and introduced me to all the team members I hadn't met in Long Beach. He then showed me around his office, where the air conditioning was down to about sixty. On his office walls, there was Roy with the current and former Governors at various black-tie galas. On this wall, Larry Hagman and Roy on horseback at Southfork, Roy and Jerry Jones...stuffed armadillo, longhorn head above the door.

But no racing memorabilia, nothing indicating any hobby or any personal achievement, unless you considered hanging out with celebrities a hobby. The animals, well, you didn't need to be a big game hunter to find an armadillo carcass; I wondered what Roy actually did to unwind.

Roy was in the telecommunications business, making his fortune in the prepaid cellphone industry. There was a shitload of money to be made, Roy was the man to make it.

"You know how to make a small fortune in racing?" He asked me one day as we drove in his Jaguar to his office in Las Colinas. "You start with a large one!"

He had a ranch west of Fort Worth that was every bit as opulent and in-your-face as his office. A few cattle, some oil wells pumping away on his land, but mostly a huge house and swimming pool. He had subdivided some of his acreage for luxury homes, lakeside lots. The names of the streets were appropriately snooty: "Chardonnay Close", "Zinfandel Mews", Roy's house was on "Freixenet Path". This was a little too much for me; others, as well, the trailer park on the frontage road wore a sign that read "Nighttrain Lane"!

It had been established, then, that Roy and I had different tastes, ideas of what was important. But the world is full of opinions, I could broaden my horizons. Also, he had a habit of throwing money around, I wanted to be in the way of it. He had a suite at Texas Stadium, another at Arlington for the Rangers games. Also, a Gulfstream to fly to the races in, although I either drove or flew commercial.

Oh, yeah. So what is a mega-stud Grand Prix driver doing driving a Ford F-150?

Just after my return home from California, as I was packing for Dallas, I got a call from Robin Holcomb. After checking in with each other, he made an inquiry as to what I was driving those days. I told him about my wagon, its condition due to our ministrations, and how we'd been Ford men all our lives.

"Do you still have my card?" he asked. Of course I did, though it was becoming a little dog-eared from being shown to the whole town. "Good. Is there a Ford dealer near you?"

"Sure, Moberly Ford. My dad's real tight with the owner, I used to race with the sales manager."

"God, can you network. Well, hie your happy ass on over to Moberly Ford and give the sales manager my card. Tell them to call me immediately, meanwhile, pick out something to drive. If you're representing us, you've got to get something new."

How's that for an offer? As I went to Moberly with Marie, we discussed what I was going to choose, letting my imagination run.

"I know I'm not the only driver they've extended this courtesy, I'm sure they expect me to rip them off for some Mustang." In grade school, while the other kids drew Camaros or Trans Ams, I drew Lincolns! "I'm sure that they expect me to grab as much gusto as I can. Think I'm going to surprise them and get something sensible. I mean, as long as it's new, it'll run. Impress them with my common sense."

We pulled into the lot, I walked into the showroom, gave the manager Robin's card, told him what the deal was. He walked off to place the call, chuckling to himself, as Marie waved me over.

She was talking to one of the salespeople, becoming more excited when I arrived, I could tell her twisted sense of humor was working. "Well?" she raised an eyebrow.

Year-old F-150, two-hundred miles on the clock. "This thing has been sitting on the lot since last October," the saleslady began. "Some old farmer up around Shelbina came in

and spec-ed out what he wanted, we had to swap with a dealer in North Dakota to get it. Standard-cab, standard-bed.

"He proved his eccentricity by croaking the day it came off the hauler." The saleslady clucked her tongue and sadly shook her head. "It's technically a year-old, but it's not used..."

"Gimme," I said.

We assembled in the sales manager's office, Robin was still on the phone. I told him what I'd picked out, he seemed a little surprised, but I assured him I'd be back for my Lincoln "when I had earned it."

The truck just went over 150,000 miles, the only major thing it needs is a paint job, kinda worn but no rust. Marie and John broke it in that night for me, as is their wont. I don't get to drive it as much as I want; sucks to be me.

Getting good at getting good...

Nicholson insisted regularly that there was really no need for me to have my own flat, there was plenty of room at his place for me, and also the girlfriend I accumulated. I mentioned this to Tim the first time Roy had brought it up, he reacted by putting a finger to his lips and motioning toward the patio.

"Don't do it, man," he whispered to me once we were out by the pool. "Can't you see what he wants out of you?"

"What? He wants me to be his boy-toy or something?"

"Well, if that's the case, he's doing a good job of camouflaging it." Roy was on his third wife, a shallow blonde who'd been through Earl Scheib a few times. Clearly, a trophy, though. "He knows what I do for kicks, and it ain't him."

"Maybe he's into wife-swapping...hell, I don't know."

"Roy doesn't swap, he buys. But, he wants to keep an eye on you, nonetheless," Tim continued.

"He's fortunate that he's got two drivers as good as we are," I smiled at the compliment, "and he wants us at his 'disposal' should he go totally nuts and decide he wants to tilt at Le Mans or Indy. Well, talk is cheap, but he doesn't have the attention span for it. Next year he'll be into motocross or open-ocean boat racing, God knows what. But for now, he wants to keep us happy, and handy."

As time went by, I got to know what 'driving for Roy Nicholson' meant, but largely, Tim and I were able to put it in the background.

Still, Roy's pool was nice, the suite for the TCU games was, too. Tim never availed himself, he made it clear that he was Budweiser's driver, not Roy's. Bud told him where to appear, not anyone else. If Nicholson had a problem with that, he could call St. Louis.

Tim did it in a nice way, using the skills that would make sponsors happy later on in his career. But he would even go as far as to bring his own food and soda for Roy's refrigerator, and using his own car even if it had been buried in Nicholson's car park. On this point, I deferred to Roy's hospitality, using his Jag if I had to run out to pick up my girlfriend or get someone from DFW. If the Jag was first, then I took it. Drove it like a granny, but I drove it.

Retina aside, Tim was on his way to winning the Formula Atlantic championship. By May, he had secured an Indycar ride for the next year. As the year wound down, therefore, the long-term preparations within the team were geared toward me. July, at Cleveland, I won my first Atlantic race, a day-long battle with Tim that ended when a half-shaft broke on his car with five laps left. I closed out the season with a wire-to-wire win at Laguna Seca, add my two to Tim's eight and we had won ten out of the fourteen races.

There was a lot of grumbling all year from some of the other owners regarding our team's performance. If some hick sprint-car driver like me could win, they reasoned, then Roy was upping the ante in terms of preparation and equipment. Sort of an unfair advantage on his part.

Apparently the other teams didn't want to make the commitment that Roy did, I stated, and then showed my right palm, a half-dollar sized blister on it. "Does this look like I was having fun? That was work out there! So don't tell me that we've got superior equipment, you want it, go ahead and buy it—"

"And drive it like me!" Sure, we had Ralt engineers over from England, and Ford's best consultants massaging our engines, but that wouldn't have meant jack without mature drivers to take advantage of it and not get stupid in traffic.

Mid-October, my season over and Tim well into his testing program at Indy, I stopped by the shop to kill some time returning phone calls from the trade papers. Surprise, I was met at the parking lot by a squad of grim-faced men, frisking me as I left my car, slapping impound stickers on the transporter, office doors, even my F-150 until I brought out the registration. Others were messing around with the race cars, I watched to make sure that no one started an engine accidentally.

"We have warrants for the arrest of Roy Nicholson," the head guy announced after I'd passed muster.

Fuck.

"Let's see. FCC is looking around his office in Las Colinas, seems the place had just been cleaned out, though. DEA and ATF are trying to find his house. NASD...SEC...any bright ideas?"

My golden goose had just gotten a hysterectomy.

I was torn for an instant, Roy had put me into Atlantics, after all. All I could do, however, was obstruct whatever justice awaited him. That'd look good on my press packet, I snorted. "Let's go."

We arrived at Nicholson's spread just in time to watch KRLD and WFAA setting up for remotes. Good thing they hadn't snooped around the back of the house, though. Because that's where the Feds found Roy's wife, with a neat little bullet hole behind her ear. That immediately got them moving, strong-arming the reporters to the front yard, while they broke into the house. Judging by their reactions, I'd say that the missus wasn't as shallow as I thought—somebody's snitch had just been croaked.

Their exit left me alone momentarily with the late Ms. Nicholson. At once, I was both regarding the body dispassionately—no point in second guessing—while unable to not wonder if there would have been a circumstance in which it would have been me down on the

grass.

Putting that aside for a moment, I went inside. Roy's house was still tidy. Until the G-Men got going, that is. By a trash can in the foyer, they found a crumpled sheet of printer paper. One-way first class American to Miami, then to Trinidad and Tobago.

"Shit, He's probably in Guyana by now," an agent figured, pointing to the dates on the reservation.

"Use the phone?" I looked toward the agent-in-charge. He replied with a shrug. I didn't care if the phone was still tapped, I was no doubt on any tape they'd made lately.

I called Gordon MacDonald's replacement in St. Louis, telling him the good news. Why, yes, Anheuser-Busch had transferred one-hundred thousand to Roy, down payment on Reynard chassis for next year. I knew I didn't have to check with Reynard to see if payment had been received. Not only had Nicholson committed manifold felonies, screwing both stockholders and customers, but he'd ripped off my personal sponsor. I had tried to develop a long-term relationship with Bud, and had spent a lot of time and effort in convincing them that Roy was good people.

The reporters jumped on me as soon as I left the house, they were more worried about the scent of money leaving the country than the body lying out back. Anyone could ice their wife out here on the pampa, but it took a high-rolling glamour boy to spirit off embezzled cash. That sort of thing was easily compartmentalized to fit on the Five O'clock News, as well. I wasn't trying to avoid questions, I figured that they'd find out about her soon enough. I just couldn't concentrate on the reporters. Some things I just wouldn't compute; Would Dad ever do this to Mom, John to Marie?

So, like the fall before, I was out of a ride, but this time it wasn't my idea, and that pissed me off. Budweiser took it well under the circumstances, they got me a public relations position, a base for me to try and find another drive for the next season. Dad came down, too, we looked at sites for possible expansion of Pump 'n Run to Texas.

That was a wonderful Thanksgiving, slumped on the back porch of my apartment, watching a Texas excuse of a winter day pass by. Halfhearted drizzle and leaden skies, bad sinuses, the Cowboys on television.

I was really disgusted by what Roy had done to me specifically, leaving out his wife for a minute. Next to my dad, I felt that he was the smartest man I'd met, to the point that I felt I could learn from him and want to emulate him. That thought scared me, honestly, considering the mess he'd left behind and the people he'd used. And even though I was one of those people, I was confused by the feelings I had. If he would come back the next day with a new line of credit and a pardon, I would still have wanted to drive for him. It was like a girlfriend that dumps you, yet you immediately make plans to get her back. Problem was, I had an ex-girlfriend that lent herself to that already!

So I was in a funk, but still trying my best to enjoy the holiday. There was a twelve-pound bird in the oven, the timer popped and I went to pull it out. I hadn't thought this through completely—who was going to get the rest of the turkey?

The phone rang, that would be the folks, I assumed.

But the voice had a French accent to it, so I replied in French, presuming the caller

needed all the help he could get. Turned out to be Maurice Krafft, a Quebec expat who ran an Atlantic team based outside of Toronto. He had a very good team, with a more representative performance level, if you considered Nicholson to be an aberration. Krafft had won Long Beach, for example, the race in which I'd debuted. His driver had run off to IMSA, and the racers' network being what it was, he'd gotten calls from Robin Holcomb and Gordon MacDonald within an hour of each other. Their conversations were surprisingly similar, there was a ticket waiting for me at the Air Canada counter.

Not before my dinner, I made a note to myself, though I felt that Christmas had come early. Yes, yes, Fucking A yes. That shot of adrenaline I got then has seemingly lasted for years. I pulled my helmet bag out, got my Ralt seat from underneath the couch, grabbed a drumstick, gave the rest to the Eritrean family across the hall, and made my way to DFW. The seat was one of the few things I'd managed to pry from the IRS impound. It drew a few looks from the passengers as I loaded it into an overhead bin.

"Don't leave home without it!," I smirked.

Parenthetically, once I'd settled in with Maurice, I didn't make the same girlfriend mistake again. Indeed, for the past five years or so, I've hardly had time to shit, let alone to find some bimbo to keep my shoulder or whatever warm. But Maurice had a cousin of his that had the same attitude as the girls I knew back in high school, with the added attributes that she knew her way around a banquet table and worked her ass off in the pits.

Upon arriving in Toronto, we all went to Maple Leaf Gardens, the Blues were in town that night. Maurice was a breath of fresh air compared to Nicholson, Roy thought motor racing was something to conquer, and had no qualms about using cash to do it. Maurice, on the other hand, looked at it as one aspect of a pleasant life, to be enjoyed for what it was and not to be used as some allegory for power or virility. Things at Nicholson's shop could be a little tense, even with a rich car owner around. Krafft's works were genteel in comparison, quiet, thrifty, while still getting the job done.

Maurice's hospitality aside, I felt that an Ontario winter was something to avoid, Ford obliged by sending the two of us to Australia, New Zealand and Macau for summer in the Southern Hemisphere. We didn't win anything, but I was back in circulation, renewing old friendships and making new ones. I kept from getting rusty, once I'd gotten over the novelty of water running down the drain in reverse, a hotel room was a hotel room and a race track was, well...

February, I rented one side of a duplex, brushed up on both my French and Italian with the neighbors. Raced a little, too. Won Long Beach, Detroit, Montreal (Formula One support races), Trois-Rivieres, Elkhart Lake, Mid-Ohio and Laguna Seca (those last three were Indycar prelims). By a large margin, I was Formula Atlantic champion. Through Budweiser's and Ford's good offices, I was offered various Indy test contracts, partial season deals, the odd Trans-Am or IMSA contract.

I had another idea, though. When I was in sprints, I felt my future was limited, but now that I was a road racing champion, I had more options. If I aimed myself toward Indycars, I might be able to keep myself out of trouble on the road courses. But since Atlantics didn't race on ovals, I would be asking for trouble at Indy, Phoenix and Milwaukee.

Add to that the fact that three years driving stockers and sprints at bullrings had dulled my appetite.

Rather, I looked toward Europe, to the tracks and marques I had read about since I was as kid. I made noises like I'd be interested in what was available across the pond, I had met a few people from various teams at the Formula One support races, my name was familiar.

I got an offer from Guy and Marcel Saint Hilaire, a father and son who had been running Formula 3000/Formula Two teams for years. Guy was the administration, Marcel was the nuts-and-bolts man, having graduated from polytechnic school in between racing seasons. I was the first North American driver they had, but the fact that I spoke French, and had been around Maurice for a year refining it, made things easier.

I flew directly to Portugal to begin testing, making do with the last driver's seat. I established a rapport with Marcel quickly, although my first brief with him had to be heard to be believed:

"Well, the engine has a bog in that fast righthander, either it's got a clogged pickup or the ignition is loose; it doesn't do it anywhere else, but the rev limiter is set too low for the straight. Now, I'm getting oversteer in the lefthanders, but only when I'm accelerating or trailing the throttle, I'm getting understeer in the left-hand bends. The brake bias is set too far to the front, sorry, where's the lever? Also, this seat is for shit, though you can't do anything about that now. Ain't your fault, besides, I've been on my butt for ten hours on the flight over."

I was using my hands to explain things, like any good Southern European, and hadn't looked at Guy or Marcel. I took a breath, wondering if I'd left out anything, turned to Marcel. He was scribbling away wildly, I could see his fingers jerking as his brain began to overload. He then handed the clipboard to me, got up and stood off to the side of the car. Guy asked, "How do you feel about the color of the car? Should we change that now, too?" I looked at them apologetically, thinking that they saw me as another uppity youngster. Marcel arched an eyebrow in my direction, slowly breaking up as he watched my reaction.

That year marked the beginning of my running argument with Jean-Patrick. We were at the Nurburgring, racing on the point-and-squirt 'new' circuit. I asked a bunch of writers "Why are we screwing with this slot car track when there is a real racing circuit across the road?"

One of them tried the old safety argument with me: "Yeah, the old course is a real ballbuster, true test of man and machine and all that, but how'd you like to get upside down with the nearest marshals half a mile away?"

"Well, sure, you got a point. However, I don't want to be practical about something as beautiful and awesome as the Nurburgring. The gods have driven over there. Dammit, I want to race on the old circuit, I want to do it properly and safely—in front of three thousand marshals and half a million spectators. I wouldn't care if I won or I sucked. But this," I waved my hand across the new circuit, "someone threw a piece of vermicelli on a drafting table and called it an outline." Of course one of Jean-Patrick's relatives did the layout and construction, it was pointed out to me.

"So what? If I'm right, I'm right, and this would have been a lousy racetrack even if I

had done it! Jean-Patrick shouldn't have a cow about my opinion, just don't compromise on a track and then bill it as a challenging course." I then spent another hour discussing the conjugations of "having a cow" and how it translated into various languages. Did you 'have' a cow sexually? Did you give birth to one? "Here, Don, take my cow," and so on.

Throughout that summer, the writers and I would rhetorically discuss the latest Americanism they'd heard. "Shitting bricks" was universal, "Giving a flying fuck" was popular, too.

That summer, I went out of my way to avoid any charges of me being an 'Ugly American'. Where some of the British suffered from Latin-phobia, I made it a point to talk to drivers, officials and reporters from France and Italy and in their languages. Even in the minor leagues drivers preferred hiding in transporters, mobile homes and helicopters, talking only to a friendly journalist from back home.

But I'd go out to the fences and talk with the crowds. I never was one to collect autographs, but I was amazed and appreciative when someone poked their program or cap through the chain-link for me to sign. And I'd stay at the track as long as there were people interested. What else was I to do? No family, and the business was three thousand miles away. I had an apartment in Toulouse, but sitting at home meant reruns of American shows I couldn't stand when I'd seen them before. Why not go out and mingle?

The question I get asked most, after what's it like to be so rich and famous, is "How do you deal with living in Europe?" Really, once you get off the plane, you find that the same laws of physics apply, the air still has oxygen in it, there's gravity over here, too. The language may be different, but all you have to do is accept it and move on. The sooner, the better. I was having a great time out of the car, sightseeing across Europe, visiting museums and battlefields, hearing different music on the radio, exposing myself to new politics (and finding them wanting.)

It was a good thing that I was enjoying my leisure time, because the racing was a disaster. While Formula 3000 wasn't a 'spec' series, the rules were restrictive enough. The R&D aspect was so limited compared to Formula One, that if you had a dog chassis, you could be God and not get on the podium. If one March chassis was bad on a particular track, then they all were. If the Marches were good one weekend, then my Cosworth engines were worse than the Mugens. If the next weekend, the Cosworths pulled better, then Avon tires were faster than our Pirellis. I would kick ass, run an entire qualifying session, every ten laps come in and readjust my setup, get new tires, and find that I'd only gained one-tenth of a second. A look down the pit lane revealed that everyone else was doing the same thing, even the person doing the best that weekend wasn't very comfortable about the feel of his car.

By default, I won the last race of the year, in Donington, England, when the three Avon runners in front of me all had tire tread separations. I was more apologetic than triumphant, but it was a win, after all. With the season over, and the rich boys working on their deals for next year, the question came up as to when I was going into Formula One.

"Hadn't really given it much thought," was my standard line, a lie and the press knew it. Anyone else in my position would be doing more than thinking about it, moreover, would have been whispering in the paddock with Formula One team managers. But my year had

sucked so bad, I felt like doing penance for even thinking about moving up.

Still, 'talent scouts' from Ferrari, Lotus and McLaren, among others, made their way into the Formula 3000 paddock occasionally, and called me at home with increasing regularity. Trouble was, they wanted me for test contracts, running development for the regular drivers, which meant another year of Formula 3000 in between God knew how many, or how few Formula One tests. Or they wanted me to bring money, to drive for Brand X Racing and attempt to scrape onto the back of the grid. Ironically, Budweiser would have paid to get me into one of those teams, but I wanted someone to want me on my ability alone.

If I were a traditional racer, the kind I read about in my old books, I'd have mortgaged the stores for *any* Formula One drive. But I was an aficionado foremost, with a fulfilling career back home. If watching Guy and Marcel scrounge around the paddock at Pau looking for parts was as good as road racing got, then I would gladly head back to Brunswick and baby-sit both my nephew and my stores.

But on the other hand, people I had come to respect that year claimed that I had shitloads of talent, chief among them Marcel. He confirmed my belief that the last thing I needed was another dose of Formula 3000, Jean-Patrick's bitter harvest. Not like I'd outgrown it, my results were dismayingly average. Still, better to fail at a higher level...

The season actually had been slated to have two more races after Donington, but the organizers' backing had fallen through. Formula One still had two months to go. Guy figured it was time for Marcel to go out on his own, he sold the team, retired to Île de la Réunion. Marcel went shopping his résumé around, latching onto a race engineer job with Ken Hazlett's Formula One team.

From the time he got his foot in the door there, he badgered Ken and Simon with glowing commentary about my ability. Ken rang me up the week after the Italian Grand Prix, asked if I'd like to come up to test. Audrey Peterson didn't raise an idiot, so I hopped on a plane and met them at Silverstone.

A hazy Tuesday morning in September found me belted into a Hazlett- Ford, a serviceable car by that year's standard. The chassis suffered from a fundamental balance problem that Marcel had identified, and had begun to fix. The Ford was a low-buck (for Formula One) water-testing effort to get the blue oval into Grand Prix racing and collect a few points. But one immediate difference I noted at this level was the fact I'd been fitted for my seat beforehand!

Simon Thrasher and Marcel checked the car, warned me about warming the tires. With "Watch out for the goddamned turbo lag" as my final instructions, I was driving a Formula One car!

I was exiting the corners gingerly, waiting until I was in a straight line before lighting up the turbo. Then there was that baseball bat hitting me on the back of my skull as it came on boost, I was going fifty miles an hour faster down the straights than in the Formula 3000 car I'd driven here two months earlier. Each lap I judged the lag a little better, getting on the gas a little earlier, but still not really leaning on it yet. Maybe now, coming out of Woodcote chicane—

Fuck! The back end came around and got the left rear on the dirt, I steered into it to catch it; Shit! The rear yawed to the right, now, and I opposite- locked it that way; Fuck! Here it comes left again, I almost moved too slow, did something break or am I just too stupid; Shit! Right again and it yawed through twenty degrees of axis; Goddamn, when is this thing going to slow down, I can't keep up? This went on for three- quarters of the straight, but I finally roped it in. I coasted around in third gear for the rest of the lap, then pulled into the pits.

I flipped up my visor and gasped for air, hoping Simon and Marcel, especially, weren't studying my condition too much. Nothing to say, I'd almost fucked up in front of my hosts. They plugged their headsets into the car: "Don, I forgot to tell you this is a turbo engine..." Marcel said, looking off, trying to calm himself down, too.

Simon laughed, at least. I looked up finally, looking up at them for...what? Simon looked down at his clipboard. "Five seconds off the race fastest lap, not too bad at all."

I looked in my mirrors, the Michelin engineers clucking as they took temperatures off the now four-sided tires.

"Don, take a minute or two," Marcel offered. "We've got to change a couple of things, might as well grab a drink."

"No, thank you." If I got out under those circumstances, there was no telling what I'd do. "Give me four more tires. I ain't done with that corner yet."

I. Am. Going. To. Do. This.

I smiled quickly, trying to tell them that Chucky Manson wasn't behind the wheel. Marcel looked at Simon, he nodded, motioned to the tire guys to jack up the car.

Back on the track, I hit the gas through Woodcote again, here was the rear coming out one more time. This time, I got it after two wobbles. Fuck you, I thought, I dare you to do that to me again. Next lap, on the gas earlier still, steering to the left, anticipating the jump, but the car arced gracefully out to the curb! I'm sure the car felt as surprised as I did, good for it. Ten more laps, smooth as silk, then I went for the pits. Simon and Marcel were all smiles this time.

"Half second slower than the fastest race lap. But, that's all due to Marcel," Simon smirked.

Two days later, I was visited by Ken and Simon at my apartment. "Over the past five weeks or so," Ken began, "We've tested a half-dozen drivers." He read off a list that included the new Formula 3000 champion, the British Formula 3 points leader, a few daddy's-money types. "You were the second fastest, but the quickest guy bent two cars doing his time. Marcel was happy as hell to have you up, we made some real progress on the car Tuesday. Bill Moore from Ford is in love with you, too.

"My driver is going to Lotus next year, and I encouraged him to take the opportunity. I think we're going to get better in the next few years, but there was no sense in holding him back. Anyhow, for Japan and Brasil we have a second car, I'd like you to be in it."

He threw a manila folder on my kitchen table. "That's a contract for the rest of the year, I'd like an option for next year as well. For now, just expenses. Do you have counsel?"

I called home, telling Mom that she'd have to look in the *Post-Dispatch* to find my

name in bold print when the Japan Grand Prix qualifying results were printed. I wasn't at the pinnacle of motor sport yet, but I could see the top of the pyramid from where I was. Holy shit, but there were actually steps in front of me!

In Suzuka, I qualified twenty-second, finished sixteenth. Sao Paulo, recorded eighteenth fastest time, but the engine blew in the race. More important, I didn't total any cars, Marcel and I worked well together.

Ford was impressed to the extent that they had a press conference to announce that Ken would be put on their engine program, no longer would he have to pay for them. The first week in January found Ken and me in St. Louis, as Budweiser announced partial sponsorship for us. It wasn't a full ride, there were still money problems, but it got other potential sponsors looking in our direction.

There are a lot of ways that drivers find themselves in an F1 cockpit. Most involve talent but all of them involve money in one fashion or another.

The group that is met with the most derision are the drivers who had their father or their dad's company find a needy team owner who was glad to see some money and basically buy Junior a ride. Nevermind that the cash transfer wouldn't pass GAAP muster, most of these guys come from places where accounting regulations are...fluid. If these drivers manage to stick around the paddock long enough, they might find themselves as an interim replacement for a slightly better team, and learning racecraft by osmosis means they could be in demand for sportscar races from time to time. On the other hand, someone's daddy could offer your team owner more money and you're watching the race from the stands.

One slight step up from straight-up ride buying is having a patron. Basically the only difference is that you're not related to your benefactor, which can be good or bad. Said patron probably has been around the paddock for a few years and is a player and knows other players. You're less likely to have your ride bought out from underneath you, because not only does your backer know people in the race biz, he knows politicians and mobsters and breaking contracts makes a lot of people sorta angry. Related to this is if your patron isn't a person but a state-run monopolistic entity, but the same pros and cons exist.

And it was popular in American racing to use auto racing as a vehicle to launder drug money; driver, team owner or both. A lot of otherwise good and marketable drivers got their reputations ruined by hooking up with the wrong people, most often those being family members! Serving five-to-ten in a SuperMax during your expected peak driving years isn't the most thought-out career move.

You can buy a ride yourself, I know of at least one driver who mortgaged everything he had to get inserted into F1, and another by implying his rich father would back a bank loan. This guy wound up doing reasonably well but also constantly juggling balls and paying off one note with another until Ferrari came calling and made everything all right. Won a shit-ton of races and a couple titles, and turned out to be a better businessman after he retired than a driver—and that was a high bar.

Ride-buyers have always been around and they serve a purpose—Ken ran an assembly line of them in his second car, their money paying for Ken to hire decent drivers for his first

car! And that leads us to the upper echelon: Drivers hired by teams, rather than the other way around. Renault, Williams, McLaren, and of course Ferrari, with Hazlett recently joining this rarefied party.

These teams make long-term deals with not only commercial sponsors but also automobile manufacturers, ensuring a reliable and sizable revenue stream. These are the teams that drivers aspire to, but you can't buy your way in.

At Ferrari, these sponsors (and FIAT, Ferrari's corporate parent) say "We want to be at the front, go get us two drivers that will get us there and make a deal with them." Slightly different at Hazlett's; my backers and Ken's found synergies between themselves and with Ken and I. Jan brought his family's company, on merit, and I brought Sola Stella, on merit. As a result the ledger is sorta mixed up but everyone gets value for money. Budweiser and Coca-Cola have to be at arms-length but it really isn't a big deal for them to do so. Shell and Ford cross-promote each other to the point where every Ford comes off the assembly line with Shell oil in the crankcase.

Today, there are just two drivers—Manuel and I—that can go to their team and demand a disgusting amount of compensation and get away with it (but Jan and Paolo are getting there and they aren't driving for cheap, either). Our results are that good. Manuel can go up to Ferrari and their roster of Gulf and Chinese investors and say that he had his eye on a Gulfstream fractional lease, it might make him a more focused individual if he had it to get from Monaco to the races. He might also allow as he'd like to give winter testing a pass, he'd built a new house at Val d'Isère that off-season. Oh, and by the way, he'd like to get a ten percent salary increase.

And he'd get what he wanted, too. I knew this because I visited him this winter; he flew me there on his jet! I have my own quirks, I don't want to do this forever, and I have certain things I want to do when I get out of Formula One and...a few of them require money. I ask a lot from my sponsors, and by and large I get it with no apologies, because I earn every penny. I *want* to earn it, I *love* earning it. Where Manuel lords his demands over his employers, I like to be relational, synergistic—friendly. In fact, I dislike the word *demand*.

One thing that every driver in F1—from ride-buyers on up to Manuel—have in common is that we know how to drive. Sometimes it doesn't look like it, when the twenty-fourth placed driver in the race is getting hauled out of a gravel trap for the sixth time in six races. But that driver has spend at least ten years driving cars competitively and they have my respect. This job is hard enough without having to figure out how to drive a shit car or wonder if you'll have a seat in that shit car in two weeks.

A couple of years and a few more sponsors later, Jan and I came off the transporter at Paul Ricard ready to take the suspense out of qualifying early. Friday untimed, we were within a few hundredths of each other, but two seconds ahead of the others. The gap narrowed to one and a half seconds on Saturday, as we worked on our race setups.

Unfortunately, that didn't mean that we could take off that much in front of the third place car, that would have saved a lot of grief on Sunday. The starter waited much too long to throw the green to start the race, as a result, both our cars were boiling over on the grid.

These cars require about an airflow of about one hundred miles an hour or so to keep the engines from glowing, so both Jan and I were pissed, waving at the starter's stand. Paolo, starting third, had his clutch slip and he crept up between Jan and me as the lights changed.

About one thousand feet after the start, one of Paolo's halfshafts failed, no doubt because of the torque overload waiting for the green. His car pitched sideways into Jan's, their tires touched, Jan flew in the air, his right rear tire landing inches from my head, on the sidepod.

Behind us, others freaked and locked up, so by the time the race was red-flagged, ten cars were either damaged or totaled.

Jan and Paolo walked over to my car, helping me unhook, then we surveyed the damage. My car was missing a lot of bodywork, as well as the radiators and ignition boxes. Jan's was worse, everything from the gearbox back was deranged, oil soaking in the gravel runoff. Paolo got away with his halfshaft breakage, as well as whatever clutch damage resulted.

Certainly Paolo wasn't to blame for the fuckup, we'd been sitting with our clutches in for close to a minute, you can't expect any car to deal with that. We were all grumbling about the patronage recipient that Jean-Patrick had working in the starter's stand. It may seem strange, laughing and casting aspersions on various people just minutes after a car had passed across my bow, but what else can you do?

Back in the pits, Marcel and Brian weren't laughing. My car came in on a hook, Jan's was sliding off a flatbed. We had brought two spares to the track as a matter of course, but we'd hardly touched Jan's and mine was a replacement for Jan's Houston crash, still brand new. I wasn't enthused about shaking it down in a race, even less about pulling rank and taking Jan's spare, his race car was worse off than mine.

I rather liked my car, for I had won both Imola and Houston in it. Jan's was set up differently than mine, anyhow, he wanted his neutral and I liked mine with a little oversteer, a legacy of my dirt days. Jan had hit the Armco when he'd been punted, there would be at least an hour delay to fix the fence. My decision was made easier when Brian came up and told me he thought he could fix my car. It was a matter of replacing a number of ancillaries, rather than pulling the rear half of the spare off. I left the press, and went to 'help' my mechanics.

They have told me in the past that the best thing I could do for them in circumstances like this is stay the hell away from the car, I'm glad to oblige. I watched as they yanked pieces off both mine and Jan's wrecks and spares. Brian and Marcel ran between the cars, rechecking and aligning things. As the new five-minute warning was announced, the crew got quieter, the only sound was the air-conditioning running in the background.

Like a thunderclap, Brian yelled for me. I ran for the car, Brian and another mechanic fastened up my belts as I bump-started the car, they jumped off as I wove through the pit lane to do my recon lap. I could hear Brian huffing as he gave his last instructions over the radio, he could have broken his leg falling off the car, and he wouldn't let on. This was his first race back since the baby's arrival, I bet he wished he were back in the delivery room, where things were rational and orderly!

Okay, I thought, at least my car is running, and it seems to be in alignment. Of course, it wasn't perfect, neither was I, the mood swings of the past hour leaving me a little unsettled. I'd have to live with the car, but my attitude was something I could modify. Jan had a harder job than I, he was in a car that we'd barely looked at all weekend. I pulled alongside, knocked on my helmet like I was touching wood, watched him rear his head back in laughter.

The way to make sure the next wreck happened behind me was to get the hell out of Dodge when the green flew again. The starter got it right this time, all of our clutches held and we got away clean. Jan slotted in behind, and we went to work. The Ferraris pushed for awhile, apparently Jan was less comfortable with his handling than I was, I was pulling away.

The Mistral straight, originally designed, was longer than the ones at Indy. Even though it has been truncated, my car will still touch 210. As you enter the straight and row through the gears, the Signes corner seems over the horizon. As the engine gets to 12,000 Rpm's in sixth, with nothing to do until the corner, you can get lulled into staring into the distance, ignoring the corner rushing toward you, forgetting you'll have to brake hard, soon.

I always try to watch the tape of each race, to find out what was happening to the others. Maybe catch some gossip, racing news from back home. There are also the in-car cameras, NBC bribed the FIA to get them put on our car for the whole year, rather than the old practice of rotating between teams. Depending on the nationality of the originating network, and how I'm doing, they'll spend half the race showing the view from behind my shoulder. As I watched the tape later, each time I headed down Mistral, I looked up when I heard the Ford wind out. That is the most beautiful sound in the world, over 200 revolutions per second, turbo screaming, and continuing for close to twenty seconds at a time. God, how does anything stay together under that much stress?

A shame, I can't enjoy the sound when I'm driving. Too much to do, no time to reflect on anything, let alone the sound of a fine engine. My personality tends toward constructive paranoia anyhow, I'm always mindful of odd noises or funny readings, unexpected radio calls from Brian. Jan's the opposite, reckoning that if it's going to blow, it'll do so whether he's watching the gauges or not.

About lap forty, my water temperature started to rise, I assumed it was because of rubber getting caught in my radiators. Fine, that's nothing that the engine can't handle normally. If the oil temperature stayed reasonable, then I should be okay. But a lap later, the car tried to step out on me going around one of the slow corners. What in the hell, I thought, checking my mirrors going down Mistral. Tire going down? Did we miss a bent suspension piece in the rush repair job? I had time for just a cursory glance, lest I go straight on at Signes. Through the corner, still no clue.

On the pit straight, as I lapped someone, I braced myself for the airflow disruption as I swung out to pass. The unmistakable smell of ol' ethylene glycol hit me. Aha! That's the problem, I had a leak. I didn't pat myself on the back for deducing that, however, the realization confirmed that I wasn't long for the race.

Out of a grid of twenty-four cars, about eighteen drivers take the green knowing that they aren't going to win the race. Slowly during the course of the afternoon, the sad truth

hits the rest. The most disappointing instance would be within yards of the finish, after laps of catching the guy in front—running out of time. Despite the wins I have had this year, I wasn't in any mood to throw one back; for a second, I was pissed, but not for long because here came another corner.

"Fuck, this isn't fun anymore," I shouted over the radio to Brian and Simon. They had a good idea of what was going on already, thanks to the monitors and telemetry. The engine management had already tried to cool down the engine, riching out the fuel mixture. On acceleration, puffs of black smoke came out of the tailpipes, so to make sure I didn't run out of gas, I began to short-shift.

"How's Jan's car acting?" I wondered over the two-way, as I digested the '+10' on my pit board. He was the first car behind me, though, the crash thinning out the field.

"Understeering like a pig, and I suppose you can guess why," Simon replied. My radiator was making the track slick. I had a decision to make: We had the field covered, but if I blew and Jan spun out on my fluid, fifteen points would turn into zip in a second.

My temp gauges pegged with eight laps left, and I got onto Jan and Marcel's channel. "I'll tow you down Mistral, then I'll get off-line so you can have the corner. Then I'll try to stay off the racing line as much as I can." If Jan felt any regret, he didn't say so, we needed to get as much as we could out of this situation; shit happens.

He zipped by, putting about two seconds in between us. Five laps left, my car went onto five cylinders and I smelled oil. The remaining laps lasted forever, waiting for the engine to tell me it had taken enough abuse. It let go just before the checker, and I coasted to a stop at the end of the pit exit. Brian and my mechanics came down to collect me. "Six points aren't bad, considering," I sighed, undoing my helmet, and pulling off my gloves. Someone handed me a Gatorade, I cracked the seal and drained half of it. My car was taken to scrutineering, I went to find Jan. In all the tumult, I just then realized that this was his first win. He was being mobbed by his supporters, his crew pulled him out of that, then began their own celebration! He was giddy when he finally arrived in our garage.

"Sorry," was the first thing he said to me, that was typical of him.

"Fuck that," I replied. "You deserved some luck, after Houston."

"Well, yeah, I suppose you're right," he laughed.

They hadn't called us to the podium yet, and it shouldn't have taken this long. Simon came back, yelling at the assorted press. Brian and Marcel trailing behind, pointing fingers behind them, in the direction of the inspection station.

"Bastards. They decided to be pricks about the scrutineering." Simon grabbed my Gatorade, helped himself.

"So what? We're legit," I observed.

"Yeah, but FIA thinks they have to let us know who's the boss. They're getting the rubber gloves out."

Danilio Zancana, the Ferrari team manager, came by. He laid a hand on my shoulder, smiled sorrowfully. "Sorry about your car, you should have gotten something, at least."

I frowned. Six wasn't the end of the world, I tried to tell him.

"You mean they didn't tell you?"

“Who the hell is ‘they’?”

“The race stewards. They said they were disqualifying you.” I noticed that he came from the other direction than the parc ferme, apparently he’d known before the end of the race. “One of Lacroix’s flunkies came by about ten laps in. I thought they’d let you know, God, how couldn’t they?”

Ken spoke up. “And what the hell is the FIA doing? They don’t originate protests, one of the other teams has to.”

“I didn’t,” Danilo replied, puzzled.

The race officials came out of their room, smiling. “Your cars both passed,” they cheerfully told us, like I was supposed to be thankful. The car was at the right weight, the correct width and height, the wings were at the right angles, the gasoline was in spec.

“So what else is new,” Jan muttered. I could tell he wanted to spray some champagne.

An FIA suit came out, pulled Ken and Simon over, I motioned to Jan. “Don’t drop the soap,” Jan muttered.

Ken and Simon came over, forming a shield for the FIA guy to make an escape. “The cars are legal, but Don isn’t. The race stewards disqualified you.”

“What the fuck for?” I screamed, as Jan tried to get past Simon.

“According to them,” Simon explained, “After the wreck, the rule book was of the opinion that you could either restart with the spare, or race the original car as-is.” He looked like he was halfway ready to let Jan go.

“Some obscure FIA reg that never comes up.” Ken added.

“Only invoked when I piss off the FIA president,” I replied. “Maybe the marshals had a bug put in their ear...” Reporters were five-deep around us, but I didn’t care how much slander I let loose.

Brian yelled “Give us a minute, please,” and yanked the garage door down without ceremony. He then came over to Jan and me. “Don, we had no idea. If we had known, we would have confirmed it and then yanked you into the pits.”

“Understood.” I had enough on my plate this afternoon as it was. “Anyhow,” I tried to change the subject, “what was with the car?”

“Cracked coolant pipe, I’m pretty sure. One thing we ran out of time to check.”

“If we had half-assed race administration, we wouldn’t have had to bust our butts in the first place.”

I turned to our mechanics. “All of you did a fantastic job. How those morons can do that to us is beyond me. The fact remains, McLaren and Ferrari know who beat whom. J-P can’t take that from us. Let’s finish what we started, see you at Silverstone!”

“Podium time!” someone shouted. Jan headed toward the rostrum, still pissed that I wasn’t up there, too.

I walked to the end of the pit lane, to the end that held the podium. NBC’s pit reporter came along for the walk.

“What gets me is, the crew bewilders me with the way they worked to get the car fixed, I bust around in a hurting car for two hours, then some silk-scarf asshole tells me that I really didn’t need the points.” I stopped, the Dutch national anthem began playing. Instead of

cooling those below him with the champagne, Jan drank it all!

That over, I turned to Stephen and the others that had spotted me. “We’ll appeal, of course; Hazlett and FIA both have lawyers. Regardless of how that all turns out, Lacroix’s still an idiot. He was last Sunday, he is today, he’ll be one next week. Okay, he won today—he got me back for the laughs I had at his expense. But, if he costs me the Drivers’, or especially Ken the Manufacturers’ title, then I’ll ensure that he’ll be whistling a different tune—out of a different orifice!”

Great Britain:

I talked with Jan in more detail when we next saw each other, Wednesday at Hazlett’s shops. He had withstood two solid days of media requests from his country’s press and television, along with the odd party thrown in for good measure.

The tumult hadn’t ended just like that, of course. Ken’s shops were overrun with news crews, I was identified more than once as “Jan Van Bemmelen’s teammate”, I laughed my ass off; now we had two proven race winners.

Jan was worn somewhat from all the attention, though he thought it to be a good kind of tired. I noticed he was more relaxed, with a more thoughtful outlook than before. It was probably my imagination, because he cheerfully denied it.

You only have a first time once...

I had entered my first full season of Formula One with the intention of running respectfully enough to attract the big sponsorship money we needed. The winter was spent testing everywhere; Rio, Imola, Estoril, Ricard. It didn’t matter whether it was last year’s chassis, or worn-out engines, what I needed was seat time, and I got it.

Shell jumped on for fuel and oil for Monaco, just in time to see me qualify twenty-fourth for the race. That was the beginning of a hate-hate relationship I have with that track. No matter, I came back to finish third in Detroit, my first podium. The cynics in the press suggested it was the ‘Italian’ in me, wired for the home crowd. I didn’t disagree with them; I had performed so differently on similar tracks. Don would be back to tenth-place finishes back on the Continent, they assured their readers. If that was what happened, so what?

The morning of the British Grand Prix dawned rainy and thundering. I was dreaming, I thought. The cars going past the open window of my hotel room hissed on the pavement, just like on the summer mornings I spent at Grandma’s house in St. Louis. Beautiful, hot sticky mornings, the wind gently pushing on the curtains, the smell of moist plaster, gasoline fumes from the street, Grandma’s toast and coffee...

Conversations outside my window: With this rain and all, Manuel might have to work for a change—it won’t be as easy as driving off into the sunset this time—wonder how this kid Peterson might do? Good point, time to turn on the television and watch the Grand Prix, I thought as I stretched awake.

Shit! That's my race, I realized, bolting from the bed and rushing to the window. On the balcony, I was pelted by heavy rain, lightning turning the surroundings a surreal blue color. I stood outside for ten minutes or more, practically naked, but I didn't care, feeling my adrenaline level rise. This would be my first wet race ever, not ever one in Atlantics or 3000. I had been looking forward to one all that time, disappointed a time or two because I wanted to see how I'd do. The forecast for Silverstone had been for eighty and sunny...

I based my enthusiasm on the fact that most of the other drivers absolutely hated the rain, I felt that right there was a psychological advantage. Then, I'd be able to use this positivity to will myself in front of them. Simple as that! Just had to back it up...

I started eighth, thankfully we all had aligned ourselves in single file by the first corner. That season, our car was down on power, but our handling was as good as anyone's. At Silverstone in the dry, that would mean we would be able to pull over under full control to let the Ferraris by, but the rain made pavement-ripping acceleration a liability. Smooth power and empathic handling was the way to go, and a driver who was relaxed and patient didn't hurt, either.

After one lap, two cars had spun, I'd passed another. On the fifth lap, the leader's electrics shorted, I was fourth. By now, I was paying more attention to my pit boards than back in Atlantics, my position registered in my head. Marcel thoughtfully put my gap to the leader on my board, and I noted the difference fluctuating: One lap, -10; next, -7; then back to -9; then -3. I didn't need a gap to second or third, however, passing them by lap twenty. Passing two good cars and good drivers, no mechanical issues, just straight-up *driving*!

So there I was—second place, and more than fifty laps to do something about first. Manuel was leading, I could see his spray at the far end of each straight. Maybe he was coasting? One way to tell, I screwed myself down and lowered the fastest lap by a second and a half, Manuel didn't respond! No! Don't tease me, I told the heavens. His car began to lose the rear under acceleration, now less than three seconds ahead.

Manuel Rittmann was in the process of winning his first World Championship, totaling eight race wins that year. He had won a lot more than that in his career, so my closing on him wasn't because he'd lost confidence in either his car or himself. He wasn't the type to wave anyone past if he tired of wrestling his car, either. If I were in his position, I'd want more than a three-second cushion, why didn't the master make the gap wider? Then my heart beat twice instead of once as the realization hit me: *You're making him do this. He can be passed.*

If I wasn't in front at the end of this race, then for my first time in formula cars, I wouldn't have done all the car would allow.

At the halfway mark, I was two car lengths behind Manuel. The rain redoubled its intensity, a strong headwind moved up the pit straight. I had an irrational thought about popping my visor and letting the rain hit me in the face, I felt so good about the race and my position. It was stupid to the point that I laughed out loud, then settled in my seat and calmly made my move.

The difference in our cars meant that I could go through any corner on any line I chose, Manuel was having to think more, be careful and even make two saws on the wheel. So, I had to get to the corner at least alongside him, then I would be able to increase my lead

through that and subsequent corners.

I used more of the engine than I had previously, shifting quicker and closer to the redline. I jinked outside of Manuel, letting my momentum pull me within a car length, then half, then alongside, now nosing ahead of him. Then a normal passage through Woodcote, and I was on the front straight in the lead!

Now stop the race so I can have Ken pinch me, dammit. But no, there were twenty-five laps left to be run. Twenty laps for water to get into the electrics. Fifteen laps for the sun to come out, dry the track and fry my tires. Ten laps for Manuel to pull something out of his hat and put me in my place. Five laps for someone to spin out as I was lapping them. Four, three, aww shit. Someone please wake me up...two, one...

I could vividly note everything that was happening as I crossed the line for the last time. The turbo screaming, the pulse of the engine revving, the pop of the gearshift as I got fourth one more time, watching the parabolas of water flying off my tires. Then the checker flashing in my peripheral vision, the crew jumping over the wall.

I parked the car at the end of the pit lane and ran back towards my guys. The best thing was that the other teams were as happy for my success as I was, I was greeted by handshakes and congratulations all up the pits. Marcel and I met, hugging and screaming, the cheek-kissing routine, Ken and Simon joining in. That was Ken's first win in over seven years, and that had been in a vastly different environment.

Then up onto the podium, laughing uncontrollably as Manuel grandly showed the way to the top step. For the first time since I got out of the car, I had a second to rest. At that moment, my adrenaline ran out and they started playing the Star-Spangled Banner. I was singing along, then I was struck by the reason they were playing it! That choked me up, crying as I was trying to sing, laughing at the way I was sure it looked.

There were other duties I had to perform on the dais, such as unloading a Magnum of Moët over all and sundry, another one of Budweiser. Playing frisbee with Michelin hats, then I dove into the crowd from the platform, something I'd seen at rock concerts but seemed appropriate here.

I don't keep tapes of all my races, but this was one that the folks insisted on saving, naturally. As the tape plays, ESPN comes out of commercial and the screen reads "1. Don Peterson, USA," then they cut to the anthem and the podium. Mom always cries, Dad smiles, and I get goosebumps.

There were more good feelings in the post-race press conference, Manuel graciously telling the writers that "There was nothing I could do with Don," and if we had switched cars, the result would have been the same. He didn't have to say that, could have said nothing at all, but he did a classy thing.

I would have loved to have gotten back to Brunswick to be with my family, but the French Grand Prix was scheduled for the next Saturday, to avoid the World Cup final. The trucks arrived back at the works on Monday morning, by Wednesday evening we were at Ricard. My only possible concession to my win was that I appeared on all the U.S. Network morning news shows.

Thursday morning before practice, we announced our newest sponsor, Sola Stella

Capital. Investment capital, seed money, mezzanine funding, all the finance channels that in other hands ran the risk of blowing up and taking companies and governments down with it. But SSC wasn't third-world and was publicly-traded besides. They had a prudent exposure to exploration companies working the the shale-gas boom going on in north Texas, and a limited investment in the south Texas oil shale one. Geologists on retainer (and one on the board) were looking for other shale/fracking opportunities worldwide and while they weren't in a position to definitively say that those searches had borne fruit, the fact that they were looking for worldwide advertising exposure said something.

"Looking for worldwide advertising exposure" was code for waving money around European sports markets. Meanwhile another arm of the company had made overtures to Pump 'n Run, they among others had taken notice of our cash flow and thought they could do us some good. They hadn't twigged to Don Peterson essentially *being* Pump 'n Run until I had arrived at their downtown Dallas office to discuss their offer. In a handshake line they put two and two together! A four-hour meeting turned into four days, and by the end their logo, bespoke font and triple-black color palette was on our cars and remains so to this day. Now we were *there*, Ford announcing an R&D program for the next year, and Ken looking for a driver to be my teammate.

There was mention of it in the race reports from England, and it became more insistent in France; that I'd won just because it rained. If it was dry at Ricard, and July on the Riviera meant just that, then we'd be back in the weeds again. I disagreed with that assessment but I didn't take it personally. "Hell, Manuel has won wet races before," I reasoned, "And what if it rains here; do you expect me to win, too? Did you tell Manuel that?"

Although Ford insisted that they hadn't done anything funky to the engine, I was second in the Friday morning untimed practice and got the pole when it counted in the afternoon, with a new lap record. My first pole since Atlantics, and now the media stopped talking about flukes and marveled at the transformation I'd undergone in the past month.

I tried hard to avoid a swelled head, remembering Dad's advice to "act like I'd done this before." I couldn't figure out what all the hype was about, this was still fun, I didn't feel any pressure, driving was hard but I felt in control, not doing anything supernatural. I didn't view the press as an adversary, we had a good rapport and they seemed to think I was a good interview.

Then on Saturday, when I led every circuit and lapped everyone up to third place, the world went nuts. Though the race was hard, as normal, it was no ballbuster. I had no concrete reason for that, but I didn't want to piss off anybody with a "Duh, I don't know" attitude. On the podium, I 'knew my way around' in contrast with Silverstone, I expected that I'd be back many more times.

This was reflected in the media and in the other teams' reactions. Great Britain was storybook, nice guy finishes first and all, but after France, I was just another guy that the other drivers had to beat. Nothing belligerent or rude, but it was there. A good problem to have.

Back in the States, I did Leno, shook a few hands at Ford Corporate in Dearborn, there was a banquet thrown by Anheuser-Busch at Grant's Farm in St. Louis.

Brunswick blew off a ton of fireworks in my honor, I acquired a few new relatives, a couple of girlfriends I hadn't remembered reintroduced themselves to me!

Next evening in Moberly, they lined up late models for the "Don Peterson Homecoming Race," (the banner originally said "Memorial Race"; I just didn't think so). My contract said I couldn't race anything else, so I drove the pace car. Quickly.

One of the councilmen came up to Dad in the shop that week wanting to name a street after me. Dad called me, catching me in between an interview and practice, I could hear him chuckling to himself.

"Christ, you win a race and people think you're a celebrity or something." Yeah, no accounting for taste, I admitted. I learned they wanted to rename U.S. 24 in honor of me. I sort of liked Wabash Avenue, the old name, it sounded like home, where "The Don Peterson Commemorative Highway" sounded like the road from the airport to the capital in some banana republic. Dad agreed, but he felt like he had to run it past me in any case. Fortunately, all I had to do was ignore it.

Tuesday morning, I got the call I had expected from the FIA. Jean-Patrick Lacroix requested my company at the governing body's headquarters in Paris, at my convenience, as long as it was Wednesday at two in the afternoon!

Fucking moron, I grumbled as I looked through my mail and got Air France up on my browser. I knew what was bugging his ass, some people can't accept constructive criticism. Apparently he was keeping this out of the papers (so far), that was a pleasant surprise. I cautiously decided to do the same, leaving our counsel at home.

After deplaning at CDG, I got a car to his office and cooled my heels in the anteroom. I thought of the contrast between Lacroix's office and the other one I'd been in recently, Grace's. No Muzak, no accouterments of hospitality, just dark wood furniture, stiff-backed chairs, and a stiff aide behind the reception desk. He has smart people working for him, college graduates in creative arts and public relations, though not an engineer in the bunch. All of them humorless, no big surprise there.

Presently I was summoned to Lacroix's office, I checked my watch, two on the button. It was a beautiful day out, but he had the drapes closed, the only light coming from a small desk lamp and a few candles. I expected him to come from behind the desk wearing a robe and moaning Gregorian chants.

J-P swung around in his chair, his usually florid face looking almost black in the dank surroundings. I could tell by the way he was squinting that he really needed glasses, but he was a vain sort. He was locating me solely by my voice, as I found my own chair and addressed him. "To what do I owe the pleasure, Field Marshal?"

A vein popped in his temple. He hated to be associated with the military, there was some question as to how many sides his father had worked for during the war.

He affixed a Gitanes to a holder, not really smoking it, rather the smoke was supposed to bother me. It did, but there were more important things for me to concern myself with.

"The stewards of the race meeting judged you to be in violation of the sporting code, specifically your use of a race car that had been adjusted in order to create an unfair

advantage, during the interval between the two starts.” Nothing like plowing in, I thought. “The stewards excluded you, that was within their province, we have no further amplifications to that.” He took a breath, I was too dulled by his bullshit to butt in.

“However, you made comments to the press after the race, illustrating your displeasure in the enforcement of the regulations. This has, in the Executive Council’s opinion, brought the sport into disrepute, jeopardizing the investment that many people and groups have put into international motorsport.” He looked pleased, as if the sheer volume of his words could cause me to bow to him.

“Herr Lacroix, I’m deeply chastened by your observations,” I replied in an even voice. He looked relieved, but wait: “I realize that a great many people rely on your evenhanded meting of justice, otherwise,” the sarcasm kicked in, “the best teams would win all the races. The value of hard work would become dominant, to the detriment of networking and ass kissing.”

Bam. I could wade in, too. “Consider for a moment, please, did the fact that you disqualified—‘excluded’ me after my team worked their asses off to fix my car restore sportsmanship to Formula One? Pull your fucking head out, tool.”

He wasn’t used to this, I guessed. His hands were twitching, shit, he’s probably got a gun in his desk. Despite that, I wasn’t finished.

“And what advantage did I gain over the field with a leaky radiator and a cracked engine block?” I queried, pacing the room. “How did the paying customers feel about the race being decided in your hospitality suite, not on the track?”

“The rules are clear,” he hid behind his desk. “The national racing club and the race stewards made the original protest, we had to investigate the charge.”

“Yeah, how are your cousins doing?” I sneered. “Just tell me your point in doing this. Please, the best Ferrari finished tenth, two laps down. They couldn’t have gotten to the front with warp drive.” What he did was just for spite, and I knew that Ferrari didn’t stop to congratulate him for the favor.

I resisted the urge to spit on his carpet. Instead, I went to the window and opened the drapes, which pissed him off. I let him blather to my back as I surveyed the grounds. Like a bullfighter turning his back on a bull he had completely dominated. Returning to the end of the desk, I remained standing. “I may have youthful good looks, but I wasn’t born yesterday. Quit hiding behind the stewards, they have to put up with your shit, too. This action has your soft, puffy, pink manicured hands all over it.”

He tried to mount a defense: “Personally, I’d like to see you suspended from competition for a period of time for your outbursts against the sport—”

“Shut up,” I interrupted. “Don’t, for a second, presume to tell me what is good for the sport. I’m good for the sport. You’re threatening to yank me out of the championship? Consider this: There are one-quarter-million British race fans that will see you swing from the startline gantry if you so much as try—or let this slip to the press.” I let him think about that. “People that I don’t even know will have their lawyers in on this. Get smart. If you keep this up, more people will be watching fucking soccer than your little soap opera.”

It made me a little sad, and a great deal angry that what he thought important clashed

with what so many intelligent people knew to be important. When was the last time you drove a car, I thought bitterly.

“The Executive Council has decided that your transgressions are egregious to the point that probation and a fine is a just penalty.” Like I’m supposed to be thankful? He looked relieved to have spat that out, despite how his summit had gone out of control. “We have decided that a fine of ten thousand Euros is called for.”

I was struck dumb. I had been blamed for bringing Formula One down so low as to threaten its very existence, and I was being billed for lunch money! What a lousy extortionist, though I could expect that from his administration of the FIA.

“Not a problem, J-P,” I said, as I reached for a telephone. “Consider it done, I’ll have the money wired.” I could tell he was relieved to get this over with, it had gone horribly wrong from his ego’s point of view.

I had one more thing to say. “By the way, which charity shall we tell the press this is going to?”

“Today’s pig is tomorrow’s bacon.”

Grace whooped when I told her Thursday afternoon. I was at Silverstone, taking a break in our motorhome in between interviews.

I wondered what her office was thinking, remembering that she probably didn’t care one way or the other. I was calling her with flight times: After the race, one auto show in Frankfurt, then across the Atlantic to Dallas and an SSC event, Brunswick, then Atlanta on Friday afternoon.

“Hmm, sounds like I’ll be taking a three-day weekend,” she purred. “Wonder if they’ll miss me around here?” I heard Carol reply in the negative. I was laughing as well, perhaps a little more than it called for, but I didn’t care. I was going to see Grace again.

“How was Paris, otherwise?”

“I have no idea. I spent the night at the Courtyard in La Défense, went downtown long enough to accomplish my business in Place de la Concorde before getting back to the ‘burbs, so to speak.”

“La Défense?”

“Think Addison, Las Colinas in Dallas. Westheimer, Energy Corridor in Houston.” And a lot of the same companies... “Nothing similar in Atlanta, that I can remember.”

“You were in Paris and you didn’t do even a little tourist shit?”

“Been there. Been there a lot but I’d love to take you there and do that tourist shit.”

“Awww. You were busier than a one-armed paper hanger,” she changed the subject. “I saw you walking down pit lane with Jan and Paolo, carrying on interviews in three languages, and chewing gum at the same time.” I hadn’t seen that on NBC’s coverage, though I admitted it was a zoo. I’m glad that I get the BBC feed taped and sent to me.

“I didn’t know you were that well-spoken. Does it come in handy?”

“Well, I figure I’m a wetback over here, so it’d help to know the languages. Even though they teach English in every country on Earth, it would be awfully condescending to insist on having the press talk in English just because I was a king-shit race driver.” I

remembered when the French in particular were visually relieved to find I spoke their language. Everyone was expecting an arrogant American asshole, I was glad to prove them wrong.

Now, the British Grand Prix, again at Silverstone. The scene of my first win, sure, but also the closest thing Formula One has to a trade show. With the exception of Ferrari, all the cars in the series are designed and built within two hours of here, along with most of the engines. Therefore, old home week combined with a generous amount of networking.

Ken got to the track late Friday morning, having been to see his physician. He'd been messing with that nagging respiratory thing for the past three months. I didn't think that noteworthy, for my part, I spent a lot of time in smoggy St. Louis. If my nose was clear, then I had a problem!

The stands across from the pits were jammed even for untimed practice, I was struck with the contrast between here and at Houston. Ken walked down pit lane to cheers and shouts, and he milked it to the hilt. Paused in front of our garage door, then yanked it up, Jan and I were inside, engines already screaming. The crowd went nuts at the show, the other teams were unnerved, Jan even set his best Friday time on his first flying lap!

We traded fastest lap back and forth all day Friday, no one else was close. Contrary to expectations, as the weekend progressed and the track got greasier, we got faster. Twenty minutes into the Saturday qualifying, with us on the front row and everyone else getting frustrated, Simon called us in.

"I think this is just about wrapped up," he decided, though not in a smug tone. It was a good idea to quit, no sense in getting in a stupid wreck and fucking up a good race car. However, there were two spares...

We looked at Simon in unison. "Pretty please, oh, we'll be good, Uncle Simon. Can we please have the spares?" Brian and Marcel laughed at us, though it meant more work for them.

We took turns aerodynamically 'towing' each other down the circuit. The principle is common knowledge, one car trailing in the hole left by the first, the second car having more power to push the first along. There was the chance we would have to race in such close quarters on Sunday, also we needed to get the spares dialed in. They apparently weren't too bad, as we got down to our earlier times in a few laps. It was about then that Ferrari and the rest mentally packed up for the weekend.

I had an idea. Radioing my intentions to Jan, we peeled into the pits. I stopped at Simon's feet, just looking up at him.

"Hello, Don. What do you children want now?"

"Well, I've had my eye on some of those neat Michelin qualifying tires, and Jan doesn't want to be left out, either."

Simon's eyes bulged out. "What the fuck, these are the spares after all, and dumb racing drivers are cheap these days." He motioned the Michelin rep over.

Five minutes left in qualifying, we had about three laps worth of gas on board, the tires would last about that long, too. I set the fastest time yet on my first lap, on the second, Jan got it back, as I ran over some joint sealant and wobbled through Woodcote slightly. On the

last lap, I slingshotted him at the finish line, our cars sputtered as the checker flew.

Shit, that was work and so what, I decided as I undid my belts and stood up in the seat. It felt good to go wheel to wheel with someone I could trust, in cars that were this good. Jan coasted by showing me his middle finger. A look at the Longines/Olivetti monitor showed why. I was on pole by nine thousandths of a second, at 161 and change.

I went over to his car and hauled him out, the crowd was roaring from the tribunes, so we went over to them. Ken came over as well, we worked the crowd for a half hour, signing the odd autograph, but mostly these people just wanted to be close to us. Jan looked both as tired and as pleased as I was, Ken was about to split open.

At the post-qualifying press conference, we were talking the usual bullshit, retelling old jokes and insults, and being purposely vague about my meeting with Lacroix. That seemed so long ago, now I was in a more intelligent, positive atmosphere.

One writer mentioned that it was a shame he had to stay around for Sunday, as it would be a procession compared to what he had just seen.

Jan stood up and pointed a finger at the guy, yelled at him in mock anger: “What, are you working for Ferrari or something? Thanks for cursing us. If we blow tomorrow, I’m coming for your ass!”

Two years ago, Jan was finished in Formula One at the age of twenty-three. He had been disgustingly talented, winning in all forms of motorsport from Formula 3000 all the way down to powerboats and motorcycle ice racing. He had stomped on Formula 3000 the year before I arrived from the States, indeed, I took over his seat. In his first Grand Prix for McLaren, he led for a while and finished third, God walking among mortals and all.

Quite honestly, he let the pressure and his press—and his ego—get to him, he read the headlines and actually believed them. After retirements in his next four races, and wrecking three cars at Monaco, he was asked to take over the testing and race simulation, a gentle way of asking him to behave and learn some racecraft. He told everyone where to go, stomping off to Maranello and offering to be *Ferrari’s* test driver. Always willing to capitalize on publicity, they accepted.

On his first test, an ‘endurance’ run, he was running a tenth off the Fiorano track record when he crashed, breaking his hip. Even as he was limping away, he was bitching about the car, which was one thing, but he did it right to the Italian press, which Ferrari never forgave him for. Jan was blackballed, at least from the European teams, and the English ones weren’t too thrilled with him, either.

He slummed around Europe, I finally met him at a German Touring Car race at the “good, old” Nurburgring. Ford had lent me to a private team for the race, the owner had enlisted Jan to be my teammate. We worked well together and I was disappointed that this was a one-off drive. Even though he was younger than me, I learned from the mistakes he had made in his professional career.

Jan was free in admitting his errors, sort of like a born-again race driver. He could still drive the ass off a car, but he had learned patience and hardly ever got into trouble.

When our orbits crossed, we’d be sure to have dinner or see what concert tour was in

town. In idle moments, I thought that if I were ever in a position to suggest a teammate or recommend someone for a drive, I could do worse than Jan. However, he could not care less about racing Formula One, making that clear when he stopped in to visit Marcel and me in various paddocks around Europe. If you wanted to give him a call, he'd be happy to drive whatever you had, but he wasn't inclined to pick up the phone himself. He was having more fun doing race commentary for Dutch television, interviewing his old buddies with a straight face, asking softball questions he already knew the answers to.

His daddy is huge in logistics, director emeritus of a port transloading firm that owns half of Antwerp and has a global reach. While I was in Houston last month chatting with Shell, he was down the street doing the same at their rail-to-ship company and warehousing complex. This backstop didn't extend to Dad buying Jan rides—he earned what he's accomplished. Although once he got into F1 for good with Ken, *then* the company started sponsoring both Jan and the team.

Not only did Jan have a safety net, but he'd been around culture, politics and etiquette as a result and was glad to share his experiences. I took notes and they reinforced my observations.

Raceday morning, Jan and I sat alone in a corner of the paddock discussing strategy. We could draft tight like in practice, but one of us might fry an engine from following so close all afternoon. So, we could always take turns leading, but when would we decide to race for the win? This was different from Canada, now we had to really balance our desire to win the race with the importance of getting Ken constructors' points. We were in the middle of the season now, and consolidation, rather than balls-out racing, was in order. France was a disaster in that regard, despite the reasons, we came out with only nine points.

Hard to imagine that the team with the best cars by far had this dilemma to deal with. As the Formula Fords whizzed by, Jan turned to me.

"If I get ahead of you for some reason, you'll get past before the end. We shouldn't make it obvious, these people are paying to see a race, so I won't wait until the last lap to wave you by. If something happens to you, and you feel like you can get the lead back again, get on the radio and we'll work it out."

"Jan?"

He continued: "If the same thing as in France happens again, I'll stay behind as long as I can, provided there is no one on *my* ass. We ought to get with Marcel and Brian and tell them, figure out our tire stops, too."

What he was suggesting made sense, if I were ready to throw my weight around, dictate him being my number two. But I wasn't and I told him that, and if anyone in the team had suggested this, I wanted to know.

"It's my idea," he assured me. "If we go all the way to Brasil bending over each other to be co-number ones, then we'll end up tied, all right. For second.

"You're the team leader, everyone knows that. Besides, you saved Ken's ass, my ass, the team's. It's only fair you get what's coming."

I sat looking at the ground for a long time. I was touched by Jan's generosity. "Okay,"

I said presently, hugging him. "But next year, it's my turn to repay you."

"I'm counting on it," he smiled.

I led from the green until the first tire stop, I got stuck behind someone else coming out of their pits, Jan came out in front by about three seconds. True to his word, he let me past in the final fifteen laps, and that's how we finished. As I'd hoped, it actually looked good, he didn't pop it into neutral to let me catch up. I had to string together three laps in a row under the lap record to get on his rear wing. However, it still felt funny to be 'waved' past a perfectly good car, but no one could deny that Hazlett-Ford deserved fifteen points, never mind what order.

The mob burst on to the track on our cooldown lap, there were at least fifty thousand of them crowded around the pits and front straight as our trophies were handed out. Union Jacks everywhere, more than a few Stars and Stripes, a few Dutch ones. It was louder than any rock concert, hell, louder than my car!

The loudest cheers were when Jan and I pulled Ken onto the podium, he looked about to cry. He regained his composure in time to grab some Moet and give J-P a champagne enema, with the RAC officials and press cheering!

That night, all the news shows had coverage of the race as their top stories, focusing on the mob and the orgy of celebration on the podium. Without exception, they referred to me as the "World Champion-elect" or mentioned the "early coronation of the new World Champion." Jesus, I thought, remembering Jan's 'kiss of death' statement during the press conference. I wish to hell that they wouldn't jump the gun so, although it was human nature to do so.

Today was a high, hot summer day that left me tired and glad it was over. But, I'll guarantee you that I felt better today than I would at the World Championship banquet. I would rather kick ass for sixteen races than do a nominal job for a whole season. It follows that I'd rather lead for eighty laps and win a race rather than back into a victory. But you can't choose these things.

I sighed as I flopped on the couch. Jan had voiced a sentiment that the other members of the team obviously felt: God, we were getting close. There are scores of people in our organization that think that as well, and don't shrink away. How dare I allow myself to feel anything else but single-minded determination to win, succeed, and not let them down?

A smile crossed my face, and I felt my heart swell, thinking of the goodwill the team, especially Jan, was showing me. If positive mental attitude had anything to do with it, and it does, then we were as good as at the banquet.

It would be eleven in the evening in Atlanta now. I let Vodaphone and Verizon do their thing, soon I would hear Grace tell me how exciting the race was. Proud of me and counting the hours until I arrived. Soon, Grace.

I was packing for Germany the next morning when I got a call from Simon, Ken had suddenly called a meeting. I had not a clue as to what could have come up so suddenly, but I also had no intention of ignoring Ken.

I arrived at the works in time to see Jan's Falcon jet touch down on the other side of

the fence. He had just crossed the Channel toward Ibiza on a mini-vacation when he got Simon's call, like me, he turned around immediately. He taxied over to general aviation, Brian and I casually secured the plane as we wondered what was going on.

Sanjay and Marcel, along with Simon were already in the hallway. We talked about the race exclusively, Simon didn't have anything to add to the announcement. Ken called us into his office, which was unusual, we generally had our discussions in a conference room or, more commonly, the lunchroom. He looked buzzed from the events of the weekend, ushering us in, getting us tea.

"I won't take much of your time, I know you all have some time set aside." That drew a snort from me and Jan. "As you all have kindly noticed at one time or another, I have had a decline in my health recently. I'm like the rest of you, figured it was overwork or some bug or another, I finally got sick and tired of being sick and tired and went to my physician Friday. Crack of dawn this morning, I got a call from him.

"Aside from having an old man's bladder and a dead man's prostate, I'm suffering from being seventy years old," he began.

"Doctor wasn't helping; at least once every sentence he used the word 'considering'... 'Your hip isn't too bad, considering... considering your age, it's to be expected your eyesight goes away...'"

"Hell, is that all?" Brian spoke up. "I thought you'd been slapped with a paternity suit. At least we'll have you around to bug for a while yet."

"About that." The room got quiet. "I think, in all honesty, that all the fun I've been having, being around all of you for the past two-three years, getting to where I wanted to be, watching the team come together—I think it's masked a few things, and they're finally catching up."

"This weekend at Silverstone with the crowd convinced me that this is a special season, irrespective of how we're doing in the points. One that we could never duplicate, even if we won the next five championships. I wish my doc had actually found something—something that could be fixed. No such luck."

"The news I just got has confirmed that feeling, it is a message to go out on top."

I took a breath. I knew Ken well enough that he wouldn't be able to just dabble with a visit to the paddock every now and then. And he wouldn't wind up like Enzo Ferrari, running the team by proxy.

However, Ken couldn't just plug Simon into place, nor would Simon buy the team. Simon was no executive, by his own admission. He had bought and sold equity positions in every team he had worked for (fully half the grid), and had become mildly rich when GM bought Lotus. Still, Simon had no ambition to go all the way, and good for him.

What a pissar, I thought glumly. Even with the championship so close, we hadn't allowed ourselves to jump the gun in celebrating it. Our reward, then, for our conservatism would be to have the moral equivalent of a retirement party for Ken.

He went to refill his cup. I looked around, there wasn't a face left with any color to it. But, oh, it got better.

"The sincerest form of flattery, as you all know, is when someone wants to buy your

operation. I have had an unsolicited offer on my desk for some time from Peter Francis, the Group C entrant. Obviously, since I brought his name up, I made his day this morning and have accepted it. The terms include the shop, the machinery, the computer database. What it does not include is the personnel. All of your contracts will be void at the end of the race weekend in Brasil, all the agreed-to payments will be made, you'll all be free agents. At that time, my ownership will transfer, as well. I trust we will all go balls-out until then. It might cost me a year or two, but I'll do likewise—with a smile on my face."

"With that in mind, I'll save the toasts and the tearful farewells until we pack up the cars after Sao Paulo, and I assure you there will be plenty of both." He opened the door to his suites, held out his hand to me, pulled me up as the others got up to leave. "I'm going to tell the rest of the shop, then the press will be here this afternoon. I want to do this myself, after all they're my employees and friends.

"So, off with the lot of you, I'll see you at Hockenheim."

And on that bombshell... Jan flew me to the show in Frankfurt. Germany was a hell of a detour from Ibiza, but he volunteered quickly and we both wanted to talk about what had happened.

I had never met Francis, strange as it may seem, and Jan had only once. Francis gave the impression of being one step ahead of his creditors at all times, Jan mused. Where did he come up with the cash to buy Ken out? There were plenty of other teams for sale for less money, I was sure.

My thoughts flew off to Roy Nicholson, how he'd made his fortune and how he used it. Francis was the type of person I'd assumed Ken would nod to on the street, but not keep as his company.

"Well, let's narrow down the reasons," I offered as Jan flew the plane east. "One, Francis fucked some rich widow to death, she left him the estate."

"Two, he fucked some rich sheikh to death, and he got hush money!" Jan threw in. "Come on, Don, Ken was the only guy either of us know that really earned his money."

Jan was right, honesty and altruism were not job requirements for Formula One owners. That made me appreciate Ken all the more, and I got more depressed about the events of the past few hours.

Jan stopped on the tarmac, a car was waiting for me. I was taken to the convention center, where Ford was showing off new models to the European press. I had just finished saying a few words to the media; rather than a formal press conference, I had rambled to the motoring press writers and they had rambled back. While there were a few people from the pit lane there, most of the reporters were from financial and car industry papers, people I hadn't seen for a while.

The Formula One writer for Autoweek rushed in, looking out of place in his windbreaker amongst all the suits and ties. Nevertheless, he was heartily welcomed. Space was made for him, a drink appeared in his hand.

"Jesus, Don, did you hear Peter Francis' coming-out party earlier?" I shook my head.

"He made warm fuzzy statements about Ken's leadership, about replacing a legend,

ensured a 'smooth transition', the usual rot you hear every time March or Brabham gets sold." That brought a few chuckles.

"But one thing he didn't say seemed a little off. Funny thing was that he never mentioned Ford once, he made an awkward attempt to dodge a question about the engines."

My fingers were tingling, and that was happening a lot today. Ford's engines were a potential deal-maker for at least two drivers I could name...

I felt about fifty eyes on me, waiting for me to put two and two together. Wanting help with my math, I excused myself and went to find Bill Moore.

Over at Ford's suite, Moore was expecting me. Out in the lobby, he shooed me into his office, while he came around to my side of his desk to talk.

I knew Bill well enough to not waste time talking about Ford's new saloons. "Well, I just heard about Francis apparently buying Ken out, lock, stock—but not barrel."

"How much time do you have?" Bill asked, without me answering he continued. "The answer we're giving to the press, and Francis, is that we've already made arrangements with the teams that'll get our engines next year, and Francis isn't one of them."

He got up to make some tea. I took a deep breath, the numbers weren't right and Bill knew it.

"Which means there's a long answer. Buying Ken gives him cartel already. Francis just got done winning Le Mans, that made him a hero in England. So, why don't you want to hook to his star?"

He answered my question with one of his own.

"You remember three years ago, you tested our second evolution of the turbo at Ricard for us?"

"Damned right I do. The motor blew at the end of Mistral and I ate one hundred feet of catch-fencing from the oil."

"Sorry about that. Anyhow, you remember the problem was the oil pump drive, it had a vibration problem above eleven thousand. Cracked the housing."

He brought a cup over for me. "At the same time as you were testing the Formula One spec engine, Francis had a program in Group C, the same engine, but a lower RPM. Endurance racing, the engine never got above nine-five, the oil pump problem didn't show.

"Later that year, he took his C to run a couple of races in Japan. For Christmas, the car was supposed to be on display at the Hyatt in Hong Kong. Our man there says he didn't see it, but then, he really wasn't looking for it."

I picked up the conversation: "And then at Brands Hatch, he had a press day, announcing his new Formula One team. Said he'd debut at the British Grand Prix, but it turned out his sponsorship never arrived."

"Or so he said. Didn't you think that was strange, with all the money floating around that year?" He smiled. "We know what happened. He was having his engines built at some R&D house we'd never heard of, he said Japanese money and Italian engineering.

"He put his engine in a Formula 3000 mule and went testing. One of our guys happened to be at Ricard, watching his kid at the Winfield school. Just so happened that Francis was there. Guess what happened on Mistral?"

“Oiling difficulties?” I ventured, Bill nodded. “That explains why he never asked me to drive. My contract was up, I would have listened, at least. But he thought I’d get too good of a look at his engine.”

Bill continued. “I did my sums, there was no other explanation. I went to his shop and ripped the ‘Ford’ decals off his damn Group C cars. Told him that there would be a truck by that afternoon to pick up the engines. He didn’t even pretend to wonder why.” He drained his cup again, went back for more. I set mine down, leaned back thoughtfully. Sad thing was, there were plenty of guys in Grand Prix racing just like Francis.

Bill sat down beside me. “I’m sorry, Don. It looks like Francis would have the inside track for the championship next year, with you and Jan and my engines. But, he’ll not get them. I’ll go all the way to Dearborn if I have to, Francis can’t steal enough money for me to reconsider. If you see a ‘Ford’ oval on the side of one of his cars, it’ll mean that I’ve gone to work for General Motors.”

I begged off the meeting with SSC given what had happened with the team, they understood completely. They love me and love being in F1, but I didn’t want to blindside them with my future all of a sudden not being so cut and dried as it was...a *week* ago! This allowed me to swing by Dearborn to let Ford’s executives buy me dinner (or breakfast, hard to tell with the jet lag) Tuesday morning. Despite sympathy and their best intentions, they still were not able to placate me, nor offer any solutions to me engine problem.

I met my old friend Robin Holcomb, still in SVO, who offered a new perspective to the Ford/Francis/Peterson dilemma.

“Don, you ever stop and think that he may not even want our engines? I’ll be honest with you, no one here knows what his deal is. Maybe he’s in bed with some other manufacturer, people are certainly learning off of our engine this year.”

And Bill Moore was right, he affirmed. Francis would not get Fords, even if he married one of Edsel’s daughters! Seriously, Ford was taking a public relations hit on this, too. The two teams that they were scheduled to supply next year might be good in a year or three, but how was I supposed to be happy to be lining up eighteenth on the grid? That was not to show disrespect toward those teams, Ken used to be one and Ford obviously placed a lot of trust in them.

To be brutally honest, I didn’t want to start over again in Formula One. I thought my racing career would have a start, middle and a definite end. I remember how I—all of Hazlett’s—busted hump to build the team up. I didn’t want to do Sisyphus’ job again.

So, through no one’s fault, I would have to find a competitive drive with another top team. Holcomb had reached the same conclusion, Moore’s e-mail to him provided the final piece of information. Robin felt like shit about it, he’d speak to the owners of the other Ford teams about leaving a seat open, in case I changed my mind.

“Thanks, but those guys probably have four drivers that are wetting their pants about getting our engines next year. Their learning curve is going up vertically, I don’t want to get in their way.” Imagine if Manuel had wanted into my car after France and Great Britain two years ago!

After deplaning in St. Louis, I pointed my Hertz west toward home. Wednesday and

Thursday night there, barely enough time to grab my mail. I had to do a ribbon-cutting for our third Moberly store, although Coca-Cola had been using it as a fuel terminal for about three weeks now.

Just like on the Continent, Missouri was in the middle of a dry summer. The farmers weren't worried yet, according to the farm reports on the radio. But the medians of 63 had been blackened by various cigarettes and M-80's.

I stopped by the new Coca-Cola plant site, the structural steel had already gone up, work halfway done on the exterior walls. What passed for the parking lot was full of various contractors' vans and trucks, the sound of boom-boxes cranked to local classic rock stations could be heard over the wind. There was a lot of bare earth around, I could smell the heat and enjoyed the grit of the dirt in my teeth.

A dust devil whirled across the ground, catching me by surprise, I was forced to lean against the rental. As I tried to turn away from it, my aspect took in a good deal of Moberly, there was the new c-store off to the west. Truly, I was the lord of all I surveyed, but I couldn't find the time to enjoy it. I was close to having this town wired, I thought to myself.

But why can't I find a car to drive next year?

As I coasted through a yellow leaving town, I realized that I'd better table that subject until I could think clearly. Fine, pull the car over to the curb for the next six weeks or so, no problem. I walked up Marie's driveway, kicking spent bottle-rockets. Being summer, the kids had hijacked their folks to Worlds of Fun, so I had the house to myself. I tuned in WMMO out of Marshall and listened to commodity reports. The most amazing thought went through my mind: I can't wait until I get to Atlanta and have Grace help me figure this out. I laughed in the general direction of the radio; it used to be the folks, Marie or Ken that I would confide in, but that was a long time ago. Wonder how Grace would feel about that?

Thursday morning, I was driving Mom and Marie crazy, bouncing off the walls of the office. Tapping my foot to some internal tune, drumming on tables.

"Jesus, Mom, that girl will put one hand on his dick and he'll be done." Marie clucked. "Then she'll ship him back to us."

"This happens about once a year, maybe twice if we're lucky," Grace explained. She had met me on the airside part of the terminal instead of out on the driveway, having arrived from Raleigh-Durham ten minutes before me. 'This' turned out to be her step-siblings and their families surprising their parents with sorta-secret visits to Atlanta. "So, it falls to me to arrange for dinner, no biggie but I ain't about to barge into Red Lobster twenty deep on no notice.

"Best thing to do is take over an airport hotel restaurant—they're usually empty on weekends and are overstaffed, that and me tipping big ensures that a bunch of tipsy people—and a half-dozen of their kids—don't bother anyone."

She pointed me and my bag toward the Renaissance Concourse bus. "And since the place is a ghost town on the weekend, lots of rooms for everyone to sleep it off. We've got suites—plural, bucko—airport view." I smiled.

"Where's Ginger?"

“At Carol’s. She and Dorian have a Golden and they love visiting each other.” The bus pulled up to the hotel driveway. A shout went up from inside the lobby as we walked into the lobby. Two six-year-old kids ran out.

“Aunt Grace is here!” they shouted, “And she’s got her boyfriend with her!” I smiled, glad that they didn’t say *another* boyfriend. She knew what I was thinking, squeezing my hand as her parents came to meet us.

“A cynic would say that you set me up.”

“I could see how a cynic would,” she mused. “If you want to believe that, go ahead. That way, you can be pensive and I can be even more nervous than I am.”

“What the fuck, I was kidding,” I said. We turned toward each other. “I’m sorry.”

She bit her lower lip for a second, watching me squirm until she couldn’t keep it in anymore, and belly-laughed. “We got this. Piece o’ cake!”

Julia and Hunter. Grace looked like her momma around the edges. He had a high and tight (“out of habit”), absolutely zero airs about them. Their hands full of wine coolers, which we took half of in order for me to shake their hands.

Two step-brothers and one -sister and their spouses milling around, chasing what I counted to be seven kids.

Full menu for dinner, which for me meant Filet Mignon medium, Noni Bacca Shiraz. Grace made do with the same, as I ordered for her, she having spent twenty minutes checking into our rooms and returning in a jade off-the-shoulder top. I looked for the existence and style of her bra, just to stay in practice. She caught me and smirked over her glass.

We had shared our table with a gaggle of nieces and nephews, who wandered off after dinner to be replaced by her siblings in a steady stream.

“Kids tell me you drive race cars?” her step-sister began as she sat down. “What do you drive?”

“Fords, currently,” I began, wincing a mite.

“OK, what’s your day job?”

“I run gas stations,” and that was the business card I handed her.

“You seem to be doing well,” moving her head to look at my suit. I had been in the same clothes for over twelve hours and was overdressed for the gathering.

“Doing well.” Grace snorted so only I could hear.

I sure as hell wasn’t going to blow my own horn, if things moved to their logical conclusion her sis would hear about the details sooner or later and we’d all have a laugh—she seemed like the sort to handle taking the piss.

Hunter was next to come over; he understandably had more time to read and had spent it productively: “Saw you in *Sports Illustrated*.” This week’s issue had coverage of the race at Silverstone, great pictures, lousy story. More sloppy commentary about waiting for the season to get over so I could be officially crowned champion. There was a photo that I liked, however—on the podium from behind, sprayed champagne droplets caught in the sun, crowd as far as the eye could see. (And better for a family magazine than the other photo I had seen this week that I got a kick out of—huge banner what read DON FUCKING PETERSON.)

Curiously enough, *People*, another Time-Life property, has been nothing but fantastic

in their coverage of me. They ask me a question, they get an answer, they don't try to read anything into it. They apparently make their audience happy, and they haven't named me the Sexiest Man of the Year, which makes me happy, too.

Julia came over and leaned on the back of her hubby's shoulder, kinda giggly, falling off her shoes. "You coming over tomorrow?"

I wondered where 'over' was, and what was going on. "Same family, more reunion, our house," she giggled. Both Grace and her momma had been treating their drinks like...*session wine*? I guess—I'd have to ask Jan if there was such a thing.

Grace looked at me, then her mom. I wondered if she had begged off but Julia had forgotten. Just in case, I replied "I'd love to. Anywhere with Grace beats anywhere without!" That got Julia to beaming and Grace to blushing. "Need us to bring anything?"

"Just yourself, in more comfortable clothes," she replied. "And that sweet Ginger of ours!"

Half an hour later, dinner had broken up with the rest of the adults watching the kids swimming while I was on Grace's balcony exchanging extra keys to each others suite. Rain showers drifted across Hartsfield, blocking sections of airport lighting as they passed.

As the evening wore on, her top had moved up her beautiful shoulders while exposing her equally glorious cleavage. It begged for attention and I was the man for the job. But I wanted to kiss those shoulders too, greedy little so-and-so, which resulted in her being about three-eighths naked and seemingly happy with the situation. Just a little mist and no audience so she encouraged my work in her way.

Which, given the closeness of the balcony and her breathing, caused me to react in my own manner and her to notice.

"Sorry," I whispered, while noting *she* wasn't in any hurry to move...

"Understandable, and appropriate," she breathed. Then looking in my eyes and turning the Georgia accent up to eleven—"There's no way for me to adequately say this—but very much appreciated."

And like adults who had made promises and intended to keep them—that's where we left it.

I awoke at six-thirty, and since I was the first one up, I emailed Grace, told her the door would be open, then showered. Seven O'clock found me on the balcony again, still raining and the airport winding up.

Funny—when I was younger, with other *girls*, what happened last night would have been part of a continuum, a step in a process that rarely was enjoyed for what it was and was quickly forgotten in the rush to accomplish this-n-that. But Grace and I...that had been a blessing and we both knew it.

She made her way in, replacing the lock and accepting a Dasani I had cracked open. Matching white terry robes, she sat down and flashed me.

"You're a dangerous woman."

"I use my powers only for good!"

That accent had shown again. "I was thinking about something last night. Your ads

on local TV—no accent. But on YouTube you're so sweet you cause diabetes. Was that on purpose?"

"Hells to tha yes it was. Just wait until I get to Denver and Minneapolis! I'll drive 'em nuts.

"But next time you're in downtown Atlanta, just listen to the professional types in the offices. Sure, a lot of people have moved here from other places, but even the born-and-raised have had exposure to the imports and their accent has disappeared. For that matter, just listen to the people on TV. I've done a little bit of consulting at CNN, Weather Channel, and we've discussed that. National wants vanilla, I disagree but they write the checks. "Therefore, since Atlanta local news never has an original thought, they ape CNN. Charlotte wants to be Atlanta, and so on. That's why I play it straight for the southern markets, to fit in.

"But my commercials are for my own company and it's my own money. Outside of the big cities that are ashamed of the Old South, that accent is pure sex and pure money. Since I'm getting investors and commercial real estate developers filling up my mailbox, I guess I'm right!"

"And it's another weapon, at least it is for me."

"Food for thought," she smiled.

She looked down to my legs, looked again—and not at my insanely-muscled calves. I knew this was going to happen sooner or later. "Damn," she whistled, checking out the topography. Where a normal person's lower leg would bow out slightly, my left one is perfectly straight--

"As if there had been a metal rod in it," which in fact there had been for six months. Light reflects off the skin of my leg differently, a result of skin grafts. Stitches ring both my ankles like bracelets, neat little holes go up my left calf like I was constructed out of tinker toys. My third and fourth toes on my left foot come up only as high as my 'pinkie' toe.

She didn't appear to be repulsed by it, if anything she looked at me curiously like Hmm, this is interesting.

"Why I don't apologize for thirty-two million," I said evenly.

"Hell of a life."

"Hell of an afternoon."

Let us now return to that magic summer of two years ago. Two weeks after France came Hockenheim. The press was over us thicker than ever, now the other teams were coming down to our end of the pit row to check us out. Ferrari was the most blatant, Zancana engaged me in discussions about the weather while their chief designer studied what he could of the car. Like Sanjay, this guy had no reason to be at the races, but here he was. Simon casually had the mechanics jack the car up on some pretext, then turned his back to us, the Ferrari man practically dived underneath the car! I held the same open-house with most of the big teams that weekend, and there were a half-dozen offers of various quality made to me.

Ferrari, in fact, said I could pair Manuel for next year, but I'd have been a fool to leave

Ken. I told Zancana that, he gave me a patronizing but friendly ‘ah, youth’, look. On paper, driving for them made sense, they were on a championship run that year, it turned out that way for the year after as well. Also, they had all the resources of both Fiat and, indirectly, the Italian government behind them.

But, Ken had brought me here, I figured loyalty counted for at least a little. We don’t race on paper anyway, the Hazlett-Ford was getting consistent and consistently better, beyond the fact of us winning two races in a row from Ferrari.

Besides, it was unlikely that Ferrari would pay me the money that Ken said I should be asking for. According to the press, apparently I was the only other driver that could match Manuel on the track. I felt confident and competent, but everything else I took with a block of salt—I’d only been in ten Grands Prix to that point. If I were your manager, Ken said rhetorically, I would be asking me for about ten million dollars. Incidentally, that was an order of magnitude increase from what I was earning that year, but Ken assured me that he still would consider me a bargain. The contract proposals that I got from the other teams turned out to be in that ballpark.

Due to an error in judgment on when I was supposed to try for my pole time, I wound up fourth on the grid. But by the tenth lap I had worked my way into the lead. I was taking care of the tires, short-shifting the engine to save gas. Thinking later, I could have imagined the mood in the various pits and broadcast booths, God, what have Hazlett got? Even today, you put a gun to my head and a Bible under my palm, I’ll swear I wasn’t waiting for the finish.

There were eight laps left, I was going around a group of cars for about the third time that day, heading out of the stadium portion of the track, coming to the first chicane. I let the last car in line tow me along, then I pulled out to the right to get him before we turned into the corner.

You always hear about drivers ‘getting into a rhythm’; it means letting some aspects of racing, such as shifting or going over bumps squarely, go onto autopilot. Then you use your analytical skills to focus on other areas, checking for anything unusual, like humming along at 195 is ordinary!

Unfortunately, my ‘rhythm’ that day included assuming blindly that I could pass that car at that bend. I could have waited past the chicane, draft past him on the way to the Ostkurve, after all, that’s how I’d passed this guy twice already. I just didn’t consider it.

As I turned into the chicane, our wheels touched, his loaded front tire serving as a launching pad for my unloaded rear one. My car went perpendicular to the ground, clearing the other car as I flew off the track. Every race driver in the world says ‘shit’ when he knows he fucks up, I was no exception. My life didn’t pass before me or anything like that, but I had time to wonder why it was taking so long to hit something, a guardrail or trees or whatever. I landed nose-first into the Armco, most of the nose stayed there, thankfully my legs didn’t. My last sensation was of my legs being pulled very hard, then something hitting my helmet. A wheel had come off my car, that had hit me on my helmet, bounced off the ground beneath my inverted car, then hit me again, knocking me out for good. The car continued cartwheeling down the track for two hundred feet, landing upside down. Finally, one of the suspension pieces pierced the fuel cell somewhere along the way and a fire started.

Whew. Even if I'd been awake, I had two broken legs. Even if my legs were okay, I was on my head beneath the car. I was caught, I'd hit the trifecta. Two things kept me from buying the farm right there; I landed by a marshal's stand, and the car was mostly out of gas by that time, the fire out within twenty seconds. I was in no condition to sing hosannas, however. When the doctor and rescue personnel arrived, I wasn't breathing. F1's doctor had to slide under the car, still inverted and dripping gas, to put a bag on me to resume some semblance of breathing. They couldn't just roll the car over and yank me out, my legs were pretzels. It was a half-hour before they extracted me. Incidentally, I won that race, too, as no one, led forcefully by Manuel, had any desire to go back and finish the race. The results reverted to the standings on the lap before my wreck.

In Brunswick, there had been a storm that morning and Mom's satellite was out. She was working in the kitchen, the big-screen hissing as she waited for it to come back up. When it did, it was about the time that the race would have ended, she expected to see the results on the screen and whoever spraying champagne on the podium. Instead, there was a shot of what appeared to be a plane crash on the track with bits and pieces scattered about the whole field of the camera, smoke hanging in the trees. The one thing that was clear, however, was a sidepod of the car, with the number '6' in stark relief. My car had been changing paint jobs rather frequently, but old number six had stayed constant.

Mom fell into her recliner, unable to even call for Dad. The sound still hadn't been fixed, she couldn't tell whether I was alive or not. At that moment, Marie called, her cable was unaffected. She related that the television was saying I was still alive, but the booth was hearing half-German, half-English reports, scattered radio transmissions, the ESPN commentators were going to shut up until they'd heard more.

ESPN showed the replay a few times, the folks going further into shock with every viewing. The operator broke into Mom's line, Ken got on. He had nothing else to add about my condition, but he did tell them that Ford would have a plane in Moberly in two hours, he wanted them on it.

Ever since Long Beach, and my first Atlantic race, the family has not come to see me drive. I know how hard they work and their responsibilities, I don't consider it an insult. However, once I moved to Europe, they drove down to Columbia and got passports. If they weren't disposed toward seeing me at Detroit, I couldn't imagine them flying to Japan or Brasil, so it was easy to understand why they had got them. I didn't bring it up, neither did they. Now Mom and Marie got them out.

From Moberly, they flew to Dulles, where Lufthansa took them to Frankfurt am Main. Then another Ford plane to Landstuhl. By the time they got there, Ken already had to make a decision whether or not to amputate my left leg. After the fact, the doctors told me what saved my leg was the fact that I wasn't neurologically stable enough for them to do it. They couldn't chop before I came out of my coma, they couldn't try and bring me out until my legs stabilized! While the doctors had time on their hands, they looked after my burns—after two hits my helmet had loosened to the point where gasoline had pooled around the back of my neck and ignited, but the burns were minor by comparison.

Except for prayer, I can't think of anything else that caused me to wake up

momentarily Monday morning, I still couldn't see anyone, but I could hear Mom and Marie and that got me to talking. Slowly I came out, about ten hours later my brain reconnected enough for me to feel the pain in my legs. I felt a little detached from them (hah!).

"I've heard of sacrificing for my art, but dammit, this is ridiculous."

Then the doctors arrived, their conversation consisted of hurried congratulations for making it this far, then, hold on, were going to work on your legs!

For the next three days, I was either getting prepared for, undergoing, or recovering from surgeries. I didn't have the capacity to carry on a long intellectual discussion with Mom and Marie, just snippets as we all sat/laid down on Thursday to watch a tape of the wreck. I was fascinated by the parabolas of the various parts as they flew off, I counted the laces of my driving shoes projecting from the front of the car, noting one of the shoes had a gouge where my toe had been. Seeing the petrol fumes radiating from the spill before the flash front erupted. I passed out again.

I wish I had been able to look at the tape objectively, but of course I couldn't. I could accept the fact that I made a mistake, even one of this scope. What pissed me off was the look on Mom's face as she watched me hurt myself. What right did I have to do that to her? There was no way I could undo it, the idea of just dealing with it was too much for me to take.

As time passed and the immediate, identifiable dangers became manageable, I began to act increasingly withdrawn toward my family, as I tried unsuccessfully to find a silver lining to this. Well on the way to a quiet adulthood, most people had gotten such reckless behavior out of the way by now, but here was my mom looking at me like I'd fallen out of a treehouse. I didn't blame her, could not tell her exactly how to feel about it, but, damn.

Maybe it was time to grow up. Problem was, I didn't get this far, win all my races, earn all my money, hell, *feel as good* as I did in a car to quit. The fact that I knew I'd fucked up, rather than some arcane rule of physics catching me out, meant that I could still do better.

I was flown to Indianapolis for more surgery, then finally to UM-Columbia for therapy. On leaving the Continent, I told Ken I'd be in touch with him soon, but he knew the real decision was still some time off. The most trepidatious thing I was told while in hospital was to get used to three months of painkillers.

Occasionally, I had an audience as I went through my exercises, the family coming down when circumstances allowed. I had an Ilizarov device on my left leg, to forcibly extend the bone to the same approximate length as my right. Every adjustment was a hoot, metal rings were screwed into the bones surrounding my ankle and knee joints, a jack was put in between and extended. I won't lie and tell you that I looked forward to the pain that resulted. But I felt a lot better about it when I didn't have my family around trying not to cry, looking the other way when I was getting stretched.

How many times could I do this to my folks? How many times could I hear the folks lie and tell me she wanted me to be happy, go on back to Europe and to what you're good at? And, if you eat another guardrail, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

No, I couldn't do that. But neither could I turn my back on Ken and myself and what we had discovered while my raw skill was intact. I hurt like hell, and only partially because of my legs. So what, I thought. There's some Tylenol-codeine around here, that'll iron me out.

By the middle of October, my physical recovery was one for the medical journals, a class of med students got their doctorates courtesy of my left leg. However, I was a robot out of therapy, with one eye on the clock, waiting for my next belt of narcotics. I didn't notice the pain unless the pill was ten minutes late or something, then I was howling. ESPN came by for an interview, thank God it didn't run, for I was gaunt save for my thighs, which were becoming huge. Hair down my back and a scraggly beard, if Sola Stella's executives had seen it they would have shit. And I sounded like a fucking press release: "I'm looking forward to getting back to my friends in Europe and putting Hazlett-Ford back on top," et cetera.

I promised Ken, the folks, Ford and my sponsors that I would be back with them soon, I was closing in on a decision on when I felt I'd be back. But weeks would pass and I was still in the same place. I was aware of time's passage, and that made me more frustrated. Man, this is hurting my brain, where is that Vike? Maybe another belt and I can get a decision past my lips.

The doctors were worried about my intake of pharmaceuticals, the specialists came in from Indianapolis and told me that no other driver they'd worked on had been on the stuff as long.

Charming, I told them. They didn't have as much on their minds as I. I almost died, don't you remember? Let's watch the tape again. Besides, this therapy is going good, I could go on with it for years. What time is it? I wondered. I'm supposed to get a pill soon.

Marie, who could talk me into or out of anything, even ran out of ideas. Out of frustration, I guess, she came by alone one evening to yell at me.

"Don, when are you going to get on with your life?"

"*Et tu?* I used to have sympathy from a few people," I muttered.

She gave me a sad look, like she had expected me to make such a deflection, but was disappointed nonetheless.

"I just wish everyone would just fuck off. Everyone wants to tell me how to get over this, but none of you really have to go and do it." I looked at my legs. Whoever created me, my folks or something else, they didn't imagine or intend me to end up like this.

"Shit happens," Marie snorted. "You can imagine all my friends taking pity on me because of my brother, the junkie. Just because your life didn't turn out like you thought, is that a good reason to get stoned and live off your trust funds?"

"You'll probably die if you keep this crap up. Sad thing is, you probably won't know or care."

I tried to ignore her, that didn't work. God, I was hoping my sister would go away!

"Sure, the folks are sick about what happened. But, despite what you think, they'd rather see you die with a smile on your face than sitting in my kitchen staring out into space."

"Fuck it. Dead is dead."

"Bullshit. Get off your ass, I want to show you something." Marie threw my crutches at me, practically shoved me into the hallway. We got onto the elevator, went up to the nursery.

Apparently there had been a blizzard nine months ago, there was a healthy selection of newborns.

"Remember when Theresa was born?" she said in a quieter voice. Now, that sounded

like my sister. “These guys were yanked out of a warm quiet mommy not too long ago. As you can tell, they’re not too happy about it. You know why they’re screaming? Because they want to be somewhere else. They’re scared, they knew they were in a better place before, they wonder what happened.”

“Now look at you,” she snorted. “I know you don’t like where you are. You were in a better place before, you may even be scared. But, unlike these babies, you’ve subsumed that instinct to move forward. You’re poisoning it. These kids have more of it than you, and they’re just born!”

“Now, down the hall is the neonatal unit. Those are the crack babies, the preemies, the car-wrecks. Some of those aren’t going to live, that’s how it happens sometimes. You aren’t important enough to see them, the nurses don’t want any losers underfoot.”

“Every day I was pregnant, I was scared—for no logical reason—that Theresa would wind up there, and I would never get to know her. I was afraid that she wouldn’t leave. I’m afraid you won’t leave. So dead is dead? Don, fuck off.”

“Do you know how much love is being directed toward these babies? Not any more than we feel for you, just show us *one* damn sign that you can accept that and grow up some more.

“And if you can’t, find the elevator and jump off the fucking roof or something. Do it now. Don’t be a drag on Mom and Dad’s good nature anymore. Brother.”

“Let’s find the roof, then,” I said, looking at the floor. She had gotten me depressed, but finally I had something to feel. Something stirred.

I was serious about the roof, though. Get as far away from the downers and be by myself at the same time. In case I had wondered where the pain went, I wasn’t too long in finding out as soon as I quit the drugs. Screaming and crying, I looked around about three the next morning to find Marie still there, looking as red-eyed as I. I didn’t sleep for about two days, but that was okay—I started to focus on the pain, trying to figure out the genesis and pathology of it. Abstractly, I started to look forward to the attacks, to know more about them, and of course then they started to lessen. Fine, next problem?

Marie and I had a surprise for Mom on her next visit. She came in Sunday morning, looking her worn self.

I leapt off the bed, asking her to do a hundred things: Call a handicapped-vehicle specialist to get the F-150 fitted with a built-up brake pedal, call Dad to go over store sites, get Ken on the line, I wanted to talk contract, tell ESPN that I want to talk.

“One other thing, Mom, could you keep these things for me?” I tossed the bottle of pills to her. She looked like I’d just handed her a Christmas present, I guess I did. I hustled out the door, I had a life to resume. Mom drove back home at eighty miles an hour and screwed Dad senseless.

I went back to the nursery every night after that, watching the babies. Some of them would look back at me. We spent hours like that, me working the junk out of my system, them learning about the world. It was neat to watch their eyes move, their brains working. And I could feel my brain coming back, too—better than ever. Passion came back. *Joie de vivre*.

Before I knew it, the doctors told me to get the fuck out of their hospital. Hopping in my car, I re-created the road trips from my past, exercising and exorcising.

Thanksgiving night after dinner, on the porch with Marie, I thanked God for putting my sister in my life. We were both crying our eyes out as I said, “I would be dead, if not for you. I am going to kick so much ass next year and everything I do, every single day, will be done in your honor.”

My forced departure from Formula One had created a vacuum of charisma and candor in the series, and I was missed by our sponsors, which Ken took advantage of. He took control of the negotiating process in my stead, though I insisted on an exit clause should my cure not take.

For my part, I was convinced by now that I was going to succeed, I would will my body to compliance if necessary. I was driven by the hope that I could assure Ken I was worthy of the efforts he made on my behalf.

He was less worried about that point than I was, reaffirming that I was driving for the ten million he had promised earlier. “I keep telling you, you’re going to be a bargain,” he assured me. I’ll modestly say that it would not have been a wise outlay had he made it to someone else, but I was still touched by his confidence.

I had a setback that winter, the car I was testing in Brasil had a throttle jam, sending me into the pit wall and breaking two of my ribs. If it had been during the race weekend, I would have had to sit it out, but I had a fortnight to recover. Walking was still a bear, being lifted in and out of the car by mechanics, but despite my body I finished the race. I had to be put in hospital in Sao Paulo afterward for a couple of days due to exhaustion, but *I was back*, seeing the faces of everyone on pit lane brighten up as I walked by. I was with my friends again. And not a second’s thought about painkillers. Yeah.

Ken’s fundraising work had paid off. He met the FIA’s new mandate for two-car teams with ease, picking Jan to do the off-season testing then run the second car, which amazed Jan as much as it did the press. Ken didn’t do a mercy-fuck job on Jan, and traditional boilerplate promises of competitiveness would never work on Jan. I’m sure it was the same feelings of family that Ken has always extended to me that changed Jan’s mind.

Brian Kernahan came over from Indy cars to be my race engineer, Marcel moving to Jan’s car. With Sanjay working on Oxford’s Cray supercomputer, we had the sweetest and best handling chassis in Formula One. The engines were another matter; Ford’s new motor had year-long teething problems. Though that was to be expected, anyone but us would have jumped in front of a train. I was on pole for ten races, including the last eight in a row, while Jan got two; we led seventy-five percent of the laps that year. Results were another story, the Fords were grenades.

But I did win Detroit, England, Germany, and finished the year by absolutely dominating Italy, Japan and Brasil. In Detroit, I led every lap, the first time back on the podium, the best way to do so. That was about the second time I shed tears on the podium, and only partially because it was in front of the home crowd. The bumpy streets made me feel like I’d re-broken every bone and turned them into cement dust—the only time the race winner heard the national anthem in a wheelchair!

Germany was special, I learned my lesson and did my lapping after the chicane! On the cool-down lap, I stopped at the chicane and gave the corner workers that saved my life a trip around the course on my sidepods. That was also the third of a hat-trick of wins, despite my abysmal finishing record, I had hauled myself into contention for the championship. Not bad for a cadaver.

But at Monza, although I won the race, I was eliminated from the championship when Manuel got second. When reporters mentioned that he backed into the title, I told them to go twist off. When you've got the best car, then you should win all the races, when your car is just okay, well, that's when champions show how they got that way.

He won three races to my six, but he got what he wanted out of the season and so did I. I got *me* back. My family got me back. I kicked ass and I kept my promises.

We were going to be great for the next year: Ken signed us both early in the summer, Ford made the engines bulletproof, the designers and mechanics all figured rehearsal was over. I had lost a championship, the wisdom went, so now I was 'ready' to win one. How charitable, I thought. Truth was, I had been losing championships for years! Nevertheless, that three in a row to end the year meant that I was installed as the favorite for the next year, and off we went.

Grace asked one of those simple/profound questions: "When you're in the airport, did you set off the metal detectors?"

"I had a note from my doctor," I chuckled. No one had ever asked me that.

"Does it still hurt?"

"On a scale of one-to-ten, zero to two, I guess. Some days it's worse—It's going to rain tonight. I'm just glad I can still feel the pain," I concluded, looking down at my feet, where she was rubbing them with hers. I had heard most of these questions before, but not from her.

"Scared?"

"Oh, no. You can't be. Myself, I never think about dying, that's pointless. I do worry about getting hurt again. Every specialist I've talked to says one more wreck like that and my left leg is gone." I shrugged my shoulders. "I was glad it was my legs and not my brain or my spine, I'd have been up shit creek, a strain on my family.

"Every race driver, when he brakes later than the lap before, gets on it sooner, takes a corner flat, thinks he can control a car better than the other guy. The best drivers always ask more questions, keep their brains working more than the others. Right answer, you're a genius, wrong..."

This exposition on my part had taken us to damn near checkout time, we had to rush to get dressed. No time for her makeup and hair, but she looked beautiful and I told her so once we got settled in her car.

"I can't get over your calves, boy. You work out?"

"Bike a little, walk a lot. Swim when I get a chance. Honestly, the best way to get in shape to drive a race car is to...drive a race car.

"How about you? That glorious butt of yours didn't just happen."

“Sand volleyball for the most part, and thanks for noticing, sweetie! When I was at the beauty school we had a team, did it for three years or so off and on. Now, I swim at the pool at the high-rise, and at hotels when I’m out on the road. Can’t do that too much—all that damn hotel chlorine doesn’t agree with my hair for too long.”

“You in a swimsuit...”

“Yeah, I know that look of yours, good thing I’m driving. One-piece. Always white or pastels. No lining.”

“Damn...”

“Good for breaking the ice with...whoever is in the exercise room, or trying to relax on the patio.” She threw her head back, laughed.

I tried to catch up on my mail, anything to refocus. She pointed to one of the envelopes I had laid aside. “What in the heck is the ‘Danforth Pape Charitable Trust’?”

“That is Don Peterson’s charity and scholarship vehicle. I don’t mind giving money to those who can use it, but I don’t want to advertise.”

“Why not?”

“Okay, get a load of this. About a year, eighteen months ago, there was this little boy in Marshall that needed a bone-marrow transplant, eighty thousand beyond the insurance. I kicked in ten grand, made a big media thing of it, encouraged others to do the same. I caught a rash of shit from ‘billys who said I should have paid for the whole thing, since I was a high-priced race driver and had the money to burn. Don’t need to hear that twice. The kid got the money and the transplant, it all worked out. No one knows where the rest of the money came from.”

“So, who is Danforth Pape?”

“Beats the hell out of me. I saw it on a street sign, I forget where. Sounds official, doesn’t it?”

She pulled off the highway chuckling to herself. We stopped in front of a good-sized house in a development hard by the Chattahoochee, water on one side of the lot and a green of a nine-hole on the other. We had stopped at Carol’s—nobody home but Grace had a key—got Ginger and hit a Publix for ice cream. Now Grace went on ahead with the dog while Julia came and helped me with the dessert. Three cars besides Grace’s in the driveway, everyone had driven instead of flying in. Since these three cars had carried seven kids between them, of course they were minivans or crossovers.

Julia tapped the DoD sticker of each as we passed: “Steve, Fort Riley. Marshall, Fort Campbell but assigned to the Pentagon—this week. April, Lejeune. You saw her last night.” She shook her head. “Marines, for crying out loud. There’s always a black sheep.”

“Hunter?”

“Retired from Fort Mac, down in East Point. We moved up here when Mac closed, most of the military in Atlanta hang out around Marietta, so here we are!”

“Grace said she grew up in Union City?”

“We wanted to be outside of 285 and the commute wasn’t that bad.”

“Didn’t she want to go in the Army?”

“Different drummer. Not a worse drummer, just different. And an interesting one.

She loves her family and that's what matters."

The men were watching some ESPNish Georgia Bulldog Football season retrospective, they were whooping it up watching them spank Georgia Tech. I wondered if they feel the same when it came to the Nebraska Gator Bowl game replay...

Julia put the ice cream in the freezer. "Follow me, I want to show you something."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Robinson."

She laughed as we made our way to her office. "I have to assume you two are serious, so you'll want to see these sooner or later."

Photo album. A smiling baby in a high chair wearing her first birthday cake. Smiling kindergartner missing a front tooth. Smiling pre-teen in what looked to be a swim-team group photo, YWCA I guessed.

I looked forward to what I was sure was coming. "Christmas, the year she turned sixteen," Julia said. Grace was notably bigger, biology doing its work. Thicker eyebrows than previous, skin more smooth, covering some things while defining some others. But her expression..."She looks engaged, in a way—polite but off somewhere else," I said. "I'm used to seeing jaded, bored, affected stances covering pure fear in teenagers, but this is different."

"Sixteen is hard on ladies, as you know," Julia began. "She weathered the peer pressure well enough—but again she really didn't have any...peers. She knew she belonged somewhere else, and it took a few years to define it and for her to put it in words. It showed, that's what you see."

"She mentioned that she felt she needed to be...inside 285, to get right down to it."

"Yes. It was more complicated than that, but she needed to be among adults, among strivers—achievers. It was hard for her not to lord it over her classmates in high school, mainly because there was nothing to lord! She knew she was going to make mistakes but she wanted to get started on making them, yesterday!"

"She told me about that, too."

"In her usual self-deprecating manner, I reckon." I rolled my eyes.

"This is twenty-one, when she had just opened her first store." She showed me a photo, one of those that nightclubs take of party-goers then either sell to them for twenty dollars, or post in tourist guides for bar-crawlers, or both.

"Is that Carol?"

"Sure is. She was one of Grace's first customers, and became clubbing buddies as time passed. Carol's a preacher's daughter and tried to live up to that cliché. Which meant that she and Grace had the same way of living and nurtured it in each other." Julia snorted.

"Luckily, they pulled out of it before they pissed away their livers or their bank accounts—and then Carol found Dorian—who's a preacher!"

The photo showed Grace's hair shaved down to the skin on the sides, what she had left was stunning purple over platinum. Airbrushed deep shades of makeup, eyebrow piercing and several more in her earlobes. Leather jacket, matching black blouse. And the same flashing eyes and smile as was on the woman I'd been spending time with.

"There she goes," I murmured.

"Exactly. Grace found what she was looking for all her life, even when she had no

name for it, and Get Out Of Her Way.”

My hands were shaking. I couldn’t believe this. “This is an honor, Julia. Thank you.” She patted my shoulder. “You can thank me by being good to each other.”

I needed some air. What I really needed was Grace, but I ran into Hunter first. “Have a seat?”

I was glad to. He was looking for a Braves game, but NBC’s coverage of the ARCA race from Talladega, the prelim to the Winston Cup race the next day showed up first.

“This isn’t exactly your field, right?” he asked.

“Right. For example, there is more passing in one of these races than in one season of Formula One. The drivers might not like it, but the fans do. It markets well on television, there’s no time change, and the cars sorta look like the Fusions and Malibus on the street.” And they don’t have Lacroix fucking things up at every turn, I thought.

“Then what’s the big thrill with Formula One?”

“I ask that myself,” I laughed. “Really, a lot of technology gets tested in Formula One that finds applications in production cars. Engine management, fuel economy. If Ford spends ten million on development with us, it’s as good a return as if they’d spent fifty million on testing the same technology on pre-production sedans, and with quicker results.”

“The only problem is, would you rather watch a brilliant engineering feat or a close race?” he asked me.

“Exactly,” I agreed. “Would you rather watch B-29’s or B-2’s?” (The Army guys in the room replied “A-10s!”)

Her folks had been trying to get me to eat most of the afternoon, I held out until they brought out cake and ice cream. Julia set out a handful of forks and spoons to use, one of them slid out and hit the floor beside me.

“Don’t worry Don, I’ll get another,” Grace said.

“No need. It’s your mom’s floor, so I’m sure it’s clean,” I replied.

More clucks, her mom beamed. “Suck-up,” Grace smirked.

“And good at it,” Mom decided.

“Hey, Don, forget about Grace,” one of her sisters said. “I’m better in bed than her!”

I looked over at Grace and she was trying not to blush. I milked it, chewing on the cake as I affected a thoughtful expression.

“Can’t see how that’s possible.” The girls broke up, Grace batting her eyebrows before burying her head in her lap.

Shortly thereafter, Grace sat beside us, watching the race. I got an idea. “How would you like to go see the Cup race tomorrow?”

“I’ll go anywhere with you, sweetie,” she chirped, that brought groans from the kitchen.

“I think I can find a friendly soul or two,” I told her. “Want to take the kids?”

They declined; “We’ve got tickets to the Braves game. We’re going to watch the Dodgers kick their butts.”

I poked around my contact list—“Hmm. Goodyear, Shell—let’s try Ford.”

Grace and her mom looked at each other as I manipulated the menu. “Don’t you just love name-droppers?” her mom asked.

“Just another arrogant Grand Prix driver, throwing his weight around,” Grace agreed. I stuck my tongue out at her, she replied, “Promises!”

Robin Holcomb was happy to hear from me, and allowed that he had a helicopter shuttling from the hotel to the track. I looked over at Grace, asked “Ten-thirty, helicopter from the Red Roof in Anniston?”

She looked at me like sure, whatever seems right, apparently she’d never been in a helicopter before. I smiled, I didn’t know what life would be like without them. “Son of a gun,” her mom commented. “He’s an education!”

Dessert over, Grace wordlessly pulled me to my feet and led me outside, smiling as her family laughed to themselves. We were in mom’s garden before she spoke.

“I blew you off this afternoon. I’m sorry. Too many kids and dogs, and you being a guest here.”

“And an appropriate amount of gossiping, I suppose?”

“You bet.” A juicy kiss for my reparations. Julia stuck her head out the kitchen door, called to Ginger, then ducked back in when she saw what we were doing.

I called to her, digging in my pocket for my phone. “Could I trouble you to take our picture?”

No problem at all, Grace pinched my butt as the shutter tripped. Julia found the dog and went back in.

“What was behind all that?” Grace wondered aloud.

I just stared at her face, smiling. “Ah, the photo album. You’re looking for the scar on my eyebrow.” I nodded. “It’s there, but take your time!”

“That hair...”

“No apologies, suh. I rocked that hairdo.”

“Indeed you did. I got to thinking that I don’t have a photo of you that I can show polite society,” I replied. She laughed and squeezed my hand.

“So I think that I’d like to look at the one your mom just took of us, in five years or so. And see how far we’ve come.”

“Holy shit,” she choked and buried herself in my shoulder.

On the way back to her condo, the heat and humidity conspired to hatch a modest line of thunderstorms west of the metro area. “Looks like it might be a bumpy night,” I observed.

“Everything we’ve been saying to each other is laden with entendres or blatant puns,” Grace observed.

Her house had that decent southern exposure, but nothing like my folks’ house back home. “I can see storms from west of Kansas City to Quincy, Illinois. Everyone back home is a weather freak. During spring, I’ll have ten farmers in the store arguing whether the storm we had last night was straight-line wind or a tornado,” I told her.

I pointed up to the cauliflower top of the storm; “This storm is pretty good, this would work back home. God, it’s so neat. That hail will take ten minutes or so to hit the ground. Look close for long enough, you can actually see the clouds boiling upward. It almost seems

alive, I'm in awe of the physics and logic of it all."

Grace was watching along with me. "What turns you on about this?"

"Mother Nature showing who's boss," I answered immediately. "There were tornadoes scraping the earth before the buffalo, Indians, and long after I'm gone, they'll still be there. All we do as humans seems insignificant, that grounds me and makes me feel secure.

"It's not just thunderstorms. On Nicholson's ranch, an oil rig blew out and caught fire. Roy took us out to it before the specialists came to put it out—it was his property and all. I walked up to about one hundred feet of the wellhead. My God, nothing but heat and noise, but I didn't hear a thing. I was within fifty feet of it before Roy pulled me back, my shirt was smoldering. When he grabbed me, it startled the shit out of me, I was concentrating so hard on gathering every piece of knowledge I could. I really don't know when I would have turned my back on it and walked back. Now it seems like it was a stupid thing to do, but not at the time."

She was looking at the storm with a new perspective, watching it change. "Last fall, there was a hurricane around Jacksonville and eventually, Savannah," she began. "Hurricane Seka or something. I allowed myself a long weekend, went to a beach house one of my neighbors has at Jekyll Island. Just like you said, there have been hurricanes around for aeons, but I felt that this one was mine.

"Snuck past the roadblocks and it was only a voluntary evacuation. Thunder, lightning, waterspouts and the incessant moaning of the wind. I didn't focus on it, like you did, rather, I let the thing overwhelm me. The noise was relentless, on and on for hours, never catching its breath. I was scared, excited, happy, you name it. Finally, my senses overloaded, or my consciousness was expanded, you take your pick."

"So, did you see God?"

"Better," she blushed. "I had this really huge orgasm."

"Same thing," I replied. Why do you tell me these things? I wondered to myself as I laughed along with her.

She continued: "I was so fucking pissed when the wind began to subside. Still, I understand the futility of dropping everything and heading to the Gulf or Tybee every hurricane season. I'm sure it could never be as good as that time. Different, maybe, probably worse."

I was missing a great light show behind me, but I couldn't stop looking at Grace. A lot of women from junior high on have made a lot of exaggerations and phony claims to get something from me, but this was the best I had ever heard. Even better, she had no reason to make it up.

Next morning, on I-20 west of Atlanta I dropped Grace off at a Krispy Kreme and went next door to a Shell station to top off her Accord. As the pump clicked off, a Ford F350 dually pulled up, an enclosed trailer behind.

My old buddy Robert Decker got out. It had been eight years, but he recognized me immediately.

"Good morning, Mister Formula One Star. What brings you to Etlanda?"

"Girlfriend," I motioned to the car, illogical because she wasn't in it, but Robert figured

it out. “We’re heading to Talladega, show her what it’s like.”

“That’s where I’m coming from,” looking back to the trailer. One of the hopefuls that he had sold a roller chassis to had tried to knock down a wall, repairing it gave Robert something to do the coming week. Not like he needed it, he was the fastest growing racing goods supplier in the Atlanta area, as well as a chassis fabricator for lesser stock car racing series.

“Being there is okay, but I’d rather be at home in front of the big screen, in my air-conditioned den than in the pits at Talladega. Either it’s 120 out or it’s a sauna—or both.”

“Well, we’re in Ford’s hospitality suite,” I said apologetically.

“Oh, that’s right. You’re the Grand Prix stud and I’m just the guy that got you started.”

He remarked that he was building a Cup chassis for next year. He had yet to decide on a sponsor, or even a body style. His shop was in East Point, did I want to come down for a visit?

“I have a feeling I’ll be back often,” glancing at Grace’s car again. I got one of Decker’s business cards, then I had to haul ass.

She was waiting in front of the bakery, today was parachute pants that allowed her panties to show through (“men think anything looks sexy if they think about it enough”), along with a knit shirt that was a little too tight, her hair was in a bun.

“Don’t you ever dress casually?” she wondered, looking at my polo and polyester slacks.

“This is as good as it gets,” I replied. The legs...“Last year, the tabloids were fighting over to the rights for a picture of me in a T-shirt and shorts. The one that got it paid five thousand bucks for it, I know because Jan was the one that followed me around for weeks to take it!”

Traffic was still light and I felt comfortable driving out in the country, so I set the cruise and fought Grace for the donuts. It was a bright day, now that the front had come through, just a little haze in the pines. She did a number on the cherry filling of a bismarck, eyes closed, cheeks sucked in, swallowing noises. (“Pastryatio!”)

“I can hear it now: ‘Formula One driver, and the number sixty-nine top Slut of Atlanta die in fiery crash on I-20...’”

“OK, I’ll stop.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“I was wondering this ever since I saw those ads in the paper when we first met: How did you get your helmet design?”

“One half Cardinal Red, one half St. Louis Blue.” I said. “I did it right down the middle to piss photographers off. From one side or another, it looks like different drivers. I used to have the team logos on the sides, but now the sponsorship decals cover them up.”

“Do those teams mind?”

“Hell, the front offices could not care less, and the players love it. The Cardinals gave me a jersey and let me play during a workout at Busch. I hit a home run, off a curve ball no less. God, that felt good.” I smiled at the memory. “On the ice with the Blues, I was doing well at just standing up.”

“What kind of ballplayer do you think you’d be?”

“I knew back when I was a kid what I wanted: Third base, utility outfield. Kill a Mets rally in the top of the eleventh with a diving stab of a liner, then win it in the bottom with an opposite-field homer.”

“How about hockey?”

“Defense. On the ice to kill penalties. Laugh when I was checked cleanly. Finish fights, not start them.”

I thought a minute. “Or maybe not. I was never much of a joiner, and I certainly don’t belong to any organized sport now!”

“How about Grace,” I asked. “What was your destiny before founding the fastest-growing service industry in America?”

“I’d be a porn star,” she teased. “Really, I’d probably be cutting hair in downtown Union City, running not the trendiest, but the best salon in town. If not a pillar of the community, then at least a joist.”

I wondered what type of man she would find in that circumstance, doubtful we’d ever meet. I was surprised to find myself mildly jealous of this unknown person, wanting to tell Grace but unable to frame it logically.

“But I’m glad I’m here,” she added, reaching across the center console to touch my hand.

The highway wound through the forest, the two directions of Interstate splitting apart to find the easiest grade.

Grace sat upright, turned to me. “What should I know about driving?”

“On the highway? Hell, I don’t know—I’m not an expert.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious. It’s not apples and oranges—it’s apples and...pizza? There is no comparison. Out here, you shouldn’t be taking risks. It’s not a competition.”

She didn’t take her eyes off me. I tried again: “Just do the common sense things, I guess. It’s not expensive or showy, so some people tend to get a little complacent about the boring stuff. Use your belts, for example, I need them to keep in the seat. When you’re out driving, have a clear idea of where you’re going—don’t decide in the middle of the Interstate. Use the fucking turn signals.”

“How about that 9 and 3 on the wheel thing,” she asked.

“Doesn’t matter, what’s important is where you rest your hands, how quickly you can apply leverage to the wheel. Out here in the middle of nowhere, there’s nothing wrong with using just one hand, even. But you’ll notice that I put my hand over yours, not the other way around, I can get it back quicker.

“One more thing: Always know how much brake pedal you can use before you lock up your wheels. Compare hot pavement to cold, wet to dry, asphalt to concrete. There is all kinds of pedal that you never use, I guarantee you, a wide area that gets passed over, more often than not you’ll go right to the floor and lock them up.”

The Anniston exit came up, it wasn’t hard to find the motel, just look for the one with a helicopter hovering above it.

Once airborne, Grace pointed out Chattanooga (“See, Rock City?”) I noticed mountain creeks emptying silt into clear lakes, indicating that the storms last night started this far west.

The ‘copter set us down behind the garage area, near Ford’s tent. It was quiet now, as most of the activity was on pit lane.

“Welcome to the Colonies, Don!” Robin Holcomb set a Ford hat on my head, one for Grace, too.

I spied a Taurus outside the trailer, plain-label white, light bar on the roof, moon hubcaps. “What is that, the pace car?” I wondered.

“Fuck no, Chevy bought the rights to that. This isn’t even one of SVO’s. Corporate is trying to sell these to the Alabama Highway Patrol, and this is the demo. Public safety director and the governor have been putzing around with it.”

“It goes faster than the pace car, however,” he needled me, jangling the keys. “You up for it?”

“Of course he is,” Grace accepted. “He was giving me driving lessons on the trip here, now he can give me another. C’mon honey, take me for a spin!”

Then she turned to Robin: “I’ll sign a waiver.” He responded by handing me the keys and putting his hands over his eyes.

The car was fitted with six-point belts, which I insisted Grace get into. I was being deliberate with her crotch belts when a reporter from MRN walked up. I knew him from sprints, I told him what we were up to. He yelled over to the FOX crew, and soon there were a video camera and a score of writers watching Robin belt me in.

A NASCAR official came up to see what all the fuss was. Robin was holding my watch and wallet, he showed the guy my FIA license. The NASCAR man nodded, impressed, stuck his hand in the window. “Just don’t do anything stupid. I mean, stupider than this!”

There were a couple of rally-style 2-way radio helmets in the car, we put them on, might come in handy. “If we fuck up, we might be in Georgia quicker than I thought,” I told her.

“Thanks.”

The oil pressure came up, I headed out to the track. I let it ‘idle’ at seventy until I gained the back straight, then I punched it. Grace shrieked as the acceleration move her back in the seat, I smiled to myself. Turn Three came up, I yelled “hang on” as I wasn’t sure how the street tires would react, even though they were Z-rated. We did five laps, I was mostly quiet so I could concentrate. I did wonder out loud if the cruise control would work, then Robin called us in, something about the race needing to start. The three of us walked back to Ford’s tent.

“How fast were we going?” Grace wondered. “Felt like sixty-five to me, but that’s why I’m a passenger.”

“One-forty or so, I guess,” I responded, remembering the last road test of the Taurus and adding a little for development.

“One fifty-two,” Robin corrected, “But who’s counting?”

We stood on the steps to the ‘suite’, to get a feel for the sound. Forty-two engines

roared as the green flew. The sound was thunderous, different from the gunshot-poodle whine of turbocharged Fords back home.

You can run into trouble describing the sound, I remembered someone telling me that a tornado sounded like 'a thousand trains all at once', well, I've heard tornadoes, they sounded pretty much like tornadoes! Same thing for stock cars at Talladega.

About seventy laps in, one car got sideways coming onto the back straight, went airborne at 185. It lifted off like a C-130, getting about twenty feet into the air before thumping back down on the apron. It hit with a crash heard over the air conditioning. Grace thought the driver would have at best a compressed spine, but I wasn't surprised when he fired it back up and made it to the pits.

"His handling is gone, the frame may be cracked, but do that in my car sometime."

Lap one-twenty, since Grace was enjoying the race and Robin's company, I excused myself and went looking for the FOX booth. I met a security guard, who amiably told me he'd never heard of Don Peterson, "But don't read anything into that, I haven't heard of a lot of people!" He went to find a production intern, who brought me a laminate.

Kevin Tiller, the play-by-play man, waved me over like he was trying to fly as he continued his call of the race. Kevin used to do ESPN's coverage of sprint races, now he was the host of Fox's half-year of NASCAR coverage, their studio highlights show, as well as the announcer for NBC's Indycar and *their* half-year of NASCAR races.

The broadcast went to a commercial, Kevin introduced me to the two analysts, both newly retired stock car drivers. They were both amazingly knowledgeable about my racing.

"Don, you want to go on the air?" the director asked, and I had no problem with that. I was fitted for a headset as the break ended.

Clever people, they showed the tape of me taking the Ford around as my introduction. "Don, you could have gone faster, but I hear the air conditioning was on!" Kevin thankfully declined to ask why I was in the area, but he did get into a little Formula One gossip.

"Don, there is a report that Peter Francis is offering you forty million to drive next year, along with partial ownership."

I hadn't heard that, I mouthed "thanks" to Kevin as I digested that on air. I realized I hadn't seen a paper since Friday, my mornings had been full lately!

Contrary to most highlights of stock car races, there are long stretches where the cars just circulate, rather than bounce off one another. Therefore I had time to answer that at length.

"God, Kevin, I once was a team owner, if Francis thinks that is an incentive...really, there is going to be a different atmosphere around the old shop next year, I'm not sure I want to be a part of it." I spoke diplomatically. "It may not be any fault of Peter's, but I believe that any relationship we'd have would be more clinical than the one I had with Ken. So if I don't feel comfortable, I'm not driving."

I leaned over and whispered to Kevin, "Believe me, if something happens, you'll be the first to know."

The race came down to a pass in the tri-oval on the last lap, Bondo flying, rubber burning, a normal finish for NASCAR at Talladega.

“Just the same, I like winning by a time zone or two, myself,” I commented.

We made Anniston before the traffic jam hit, Grace was a little worn out by all the new things she had seen, she fell asleep as we headed back to Atlanta. She had the seat back, the thought occurred to me that if were rear-ended, she’d have her ankles behind her ears, but not the way I’d like...

I slowed for the inevitable traffic jam inside I-285, the change in road noise stirred her. “We went through Nashville on the way out, right?” I wondered out loud, that caused her to chuckle and sit up.

A plane awaited me at Hartsfield. She was quiet, though, keeping her thoughts to herself, I was feeling a little depressed too, though knowing that she did too made it better.

Back in her house for a moment, she petted Ginger and went straight toward her bedroom. As she walked, she unhooked her bra, pulling it through her shirt sleeve without removing her shirt. No-looked it into the bathroom.

She sat on her bed, on one elbow, as I got my baggage ready. I was tired from the day as well, and not really in the mood to expend any energy geared toward leaving Grace. I flopped down on the bed.

“Grace, I’ve got a problem, I need another brain to work with.” She rolled over onto both elbows.

“Shoot,” she prodded.

I highlighted Ken’s decision, Francis’ purchase and the subsequent decision of Ford to take their toys elsewhere.

“Now let me understand, you’re shaken up about Ford’s decision, but the fact remains you still want to race, right?”

“I’m getting better at it.”

“So this perplexity you speak of is because of a desire for continuity, nice and as comfortable as possible. Hell, everyone wants that, you’ve got to be flexible.”

“I suppose, but things have been so simple, I had time to concentrate on my driving.”

“That’s just fine, but you can’t whine about it. Ford has essentially said you should go, at least they aren’t begging you to go to one of the mid-fielders.

“Now, assuming every team had a seat open, they all want you, they’re willing to pay you an honorable salary, *where would you like to go?*”

“Deal from a position of strength. Now’s the time to wag your dick—metaphorically speaking. You are Don Peterson, after all.”

I had to agree with her. All things equal, I was the points leader. Though the Hazlett was the best car this year, it was my ability that helped to change the potential into reality. If I called any one of the top three teams’ management, they’d be both expecting it, and still shitting at the possibility of getting me. I could do wonders with their cars.

Maybe I was just seeking validation for a plan—*dream*—I had in my head. Maybe I just was waiting for her to suggest that I should quit, but that didn’t happen. Either way, I loved the way her brain worked. She knew what I was thinking, too, she reached down and kissed me. I felt my breathing speed up, far more than the kiss itself should have done.

"If I'd never heard of Hazlett, or Francis or Ford, then I'd drive for Ferrari." I told her of growing up reading about and watching the shark-nose cars that won the titles back in '61; the Le Mans cars, the 512's; finally the 312 and 312T's, never really technologically advanced, but works of art.

And thinking of all the great drivers, a who's who dating back before the war. Heroic, brilliant, tragic personalities.

"I think you belong there," Grace told me. "As long as you are only heroic and brilliant, not tragic. What do you have to lose? The worst thing that can happen is they'll say no.

"What's your folks' take on this?" she asked.

"I haven't asked them." I knew that would get a reaction out of her, she stopped what she was doing, sat back up. "I wanted your opinion, not anyone else's. And you're very good at this."

"I didn't do shit. I just let you think out loud."

"That's a skill, Grace."

She nodded. Not arrogant, no reason to be.

Grace drove me to Hartsfield that night. Skycaps chatted about their weekends, but we barely heard them. Thunderstorms along the mid-Atlantic coast were delaying my flight about half an hour, but on a pond-hopper, who cares? Especially since that meant thirty minutes more with Grace.

Damn 9/11 all to hell—at one time we could have been able to sit around with coffee and donuts airside up until boarding. Now the TVs in the gates don't even bother to show arrivals.

She inspected my passport picture before the security area. "Jeez, this picture looks like shit. You ought to come by one of my studios, I'll fix you up."

"You're right, this looks like it was done on about two minutes notice. Because it was." God, I looked young, and that was only eighteen months ago.

"You still shoot pictures?"

"Yep, still cut hair, too. Just got my license renewed. Need a haircut? I'll do it next Monday."

That reminded me, it was going to be a matter of days before I saw her again, not weeks like before. Still, way too much time.

The screening line started moving. "Well, ma'am, this was fun, I'll have to remember you," I deadpanned, rewarded by a squeeze of my butt and a sigh.

"Don, I'm not going to get weepy, because I know you're coming back to me." She gave me a tight smile, hoping her words would be enough.

"Well, you told me that I'd find you irresistible," I reminded her.

"That was perhaps a little too much self-confidence," she replied, her voice wobbling. "I don't feel so secure now."

That did it, I pulled her to me. Tongue and everything, a hell of a way to end the day.

Germany:

Eight at night in Atlanta turned into nine in the morning by the time I got back to London. I had been home less than five minutes when the doorbell rang, I let Jan in. We discussed my tour of Talladega for a few minutes as he rooted a cane-sugar Coke out of the fridge.

"You oughta try one of those Barq's in there." I'd cleaned out a H-E-B while in Houston and stuffed them in the transporter.

He chuckled while bringing me one and sat at my kitchen table. "Don, I've got a press conference with Francis tomorrow morning," he announced.

I nodded, I sort of expected this to happen. Despite my feelings for Francis, there was no arguing about Jan's pedigree. To be honest, we all knew of Francis' potential, I just wasn't in the mood to admit it. "Did you ask for number-one status?"

"Sort of." He caught my eyes. "I insisted that he give you right of first refusal, and if you bit, we'd be equal again."

That was touching, it also spoke well of Jan's influence on Francis. Rather than allow any sentiment to sneak in, I changed the subject.

"Who's supplying your engines?" I wondered more as a race fan than anything else.

"We can't say," he shrugged, I noticed the 'we'. "But Peter told me who, and then I signed, if that's any indication."

That smelled a little fishy, I told him, amazed that he was buying Francis' bill of goods.

"Hey, first off, he gave me a signing bonus, which is already in my bank. Then, my contract reads that if his deal doesn't go through, he'll release me—keep the bonus."

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

"So, you've had a few days to think about it," Jan countered, "How about Don?"

"I don't want to cop out, but I don't know. God," I sighed, "Until last week, my only plan was getting around to beginning to think about preparing to get our next contract done. I thought Ken would always be there, Ford, too."

He had no answer to that, so I asked Jan how the others felt about the change. "I guess you were away from the internet last week. Simon is staying. And Marcel is going to be our designer. About time, don't you think?"

I agreed. Everyone, Sanjay included, thought it was time for Marcel to get a design job.

"But where's Sanjay going?"

"Penske. Brian, as well." Penske builds all his cars down the road a few miles from our shop, though they never race them over here. Sanjay would just drive a different way to work. Brian, however, would probably never make it back to the England during the season.

"Yeah, they flew over to the States, told Penske yes, but then said to leave them alone until after Brasil. I don't think there's any problem with our guys being focused," Jan smiled.

I let this sink in, feeling like I did at my high school graduation, us going off to other lives. And from then on look at each another as old friends, and maybe nothing more.

No help for it. But we still had this year.

Next day at noon, I watched as Peter Francis announced Jan as his driver. Francis repeated to the room the offer he made to me, he had to answer a few questions about that, as well as more grilling about the engines.

I listened and watched from another room, it wasn't my party. But afterward, Jan and I answered questions. It felt screwy, having to be vague and couch my language, to avoid sounding so pessimistic. But Francis unnerved me, his deal with Jan foremost, but also the plans he had for the shop and the people.

I wasn't so sure that Sanjay and Brian weren't being pushed out, although Penske wasn't a gulag! And the artist's rendering of the works showed my garden was to be razed, not to be replaced by anything, just taken out. Small point, I know, but Ken and I worked that lot together.

"I know this couldn't last forever," I sighed, "my plan was to ride shotgun for Jan next year so he could get his title, he's done so much for me."

"Don labors under the assumption that I need his help," he said to the crowd in a flat voice. It took me a second, but I caught on, flipped him off. I stayed as long as the reporters did, then went home and made a call to Italy.

The call was answered at Ferrari by their equivalent of a press officer, who informed me that the team manager and president of Fiat were both at a test session at Fiorano, trying to make up the difference to those damned Hazlett-Fords! But, she assured me, they would be made aware of my call, and of course they had Mister Peterson's number?

I couldn't have made a clearer signal to Ferrari, despite the casual tone. It was their move now.

I was closing up the Pump 'n Run one night, discussing the day's issues with a Chariton County deputy when I heard a rumbling noise at the gas island. It didn't sound like the usual Duster with glasspaks that the kids in town favored, so we went on the porch for a closer look. A two-year-old black Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano was gassing up, I leaned back on my heels to study it. The deputy was impressed by the driver, the right fielder for the Royals, but I was fascinated by the car. It barely came up to my waist, sprouting scoops and spoilers that weren't just for show, mirrors mounted on stalks projecting from the doors, just like on the race cars.

Out of place, however, was the bug-splattered windshield, this was the primary reason for the guy's stop.

"Damn blade blew off about five miles past Moberly. I ain't about to use the wipers, I don't need a scratched windshield," he explained. He looked disgusted when I joked that our last Ferrari dealership closed the year before. I wondered what speed was needed to blow a wiper blade off, but I kept that to myself.

The key to the Farm and Auto jingled in my hand. "I think we can help you out." Unlocking, I hit a light, grabbed a Bosch chart and pulled a pair of refills out of the rack. I waved them as I got back in the store, the guy asked how much the damage was.

"Hell, Don will give them to you if you let him drive your car, ain't that right, Don?" the

deputy chirped, uninvited. Thanks a lot, bud, make me look out to be a star-struck hick.

To my eternal surprise, the owner threw me the keys! I looked at the deputy, he just shrugged and covered his eyes. I wonder if the car's owner knew whom he had just entrusted his car to. I'm sure the cop would fill him in later, after they had discussed ball for a while.

My heart pounded as I fitted the blades and cleaned the windscreen. Make sure you take the gas hose out, I thought wryly. The lot lights went out as the deputy hit the breakers, closing up for me. Take it out of gear, start the engine, wait for the oil pressure gauge to move, then find first. Good, it didn't stall, I thought, as I relaxed and took a deep whiff of cologne and leather.

Fifty in first, eighty in second, third, fourth, letting the power band do its job. At one hundred, I rowed into fifth, reaching one-fifty with fifteen hundred revs and one more gear left to play with. I was bummed that 24 didn't have any curves to speak of, so I didn't have much opportunity to test the handling. However, I had to go ten miles west to find a blacktop road to turn around on, didn't want to mess up the paint job on a gravel turnout, right?

Back inbound, I saw the reflection of a raccoon's eyes on the shoulder. Fortunately, he was foraging in the weeds, because hitting him would be a hell of a way to total the Ferrari. I thought again—one-eighty in sixth would be the perfect way to go! No excuses, just a long gouge in the corn.

Rolling back to the pump, I was met by the deputy and the Ferrari's owner. The cop asked if I turned around where I indeed had, figured out my average speed in his head and smiled. I could tell that the two of them wanted some review of the car and my drive. "Nice radio," I said, looking straight at the pump, nonchalant on the outside but giggling inwardly.

Late Wednesday night, Ferrari called. Danilo Zancana was on the other end, I was pleased that he had been the one chosen to talk. We chatted about our good friend Lacroix, he inquired about Ken's health and asked my thoughts on Peter Francis. He then mentioned something else, something that only a Formula One driver in search of a team would have caught.

"On our last trip through Hockenheim, I finally managed to find a good Italian restaurant. About twenty miles from our hotel, pasta that I'm sure would suit your tastes. If you get in early enough, look me up and I'd be pleased to buy you lunch." I allowed that my schedule had me at the track just after noon on Thursday, I was honored by his invitation. Perhaps I would be in a position to repay it in the future?

Our communication told several things; first, Danilo knew a place out of the way—we could forestall any snooping by the press; second, being out of the way, we could have time to talk about anything that arose. By the way, he didn't mean any disdain by mentioning my taste in Italian food, we have eaten meals in several restaurants around the world. I had found a decent hole-in-the-wall in Sao Paulo, and he in Tokyo.

Well, that's out of the way, I thought, humming as I dialed Grace's house. The warmth in her voice indicated that she'd received the flowers I'd sent, also she mentioned the thank-you note I'd sent her mom.

"So, I just got off the phone with your sister," she casually mentioned. I was more

surprised at her initiative than anything, though I wondered how she got a hold of her.

“Google gave me the number of the Pump ‘n Run, just so happened Marie was dropping off something. Living in a small town comes in handy, I guess.”

“So what possessed you to call?”

“I wanted to tell her about her classy brother. My mom was really impressed by the time you took to write.” Aww. “By the way, your sister invited me up, which is more than you’ve done,” she needled.

“Have fun, tell them I said hi.” I said, she snorted.

“Hey, did you call Ferrari?”

“Yeah, got a lunch tomorrow, Just going to talk. I really have no idea of what to expect. Usually, people come knocking on my door, not the other way around.”

“Yeah, it might affect your position,” she admitted. “Still, it ain’t the money, right? After all, those millions just run together, isn’t that it?”

We were in a stretch where the races were bunched together: France and England on consecutive weekends; one week break, then Germany. Another week off before Belgium, Spain and Hungary in a fifteen day span. I thought out loud that I’d be worn as hell after Budapest, but I’d have some R and R in Atlanta—and Brunswick, apparently.

“Think again, stud. By the time you leave me, you’ll be looking forward to hiding out in your race car.”

“Well, professionals draw on reserves of strength that they never thought they had,” I stated bravely.

I called Marie next, hoping I wouldn’t interrupt their dinner. “Hi, Don,” Marie said in a lecherous voice, “been eating crackers in bed lately?” I fell back on the couch, feeling relieved that she got along with Grace, me now having heard from both sides. If you only knew, Marie...

I heard thunder over the phone line, and the kids playing outside. Remembering watching Marie and John living seemingly idyllic lives, I felt privileged to be an observer. Maybe it was my turn? Shut up, I thought, though Marie seemed to know what I was deliberating.

“Be careful, brother. You’d have to be on acid not to see how good she is for you.” I laughed at her choice of words. I had done some PSAs for Anheuser-Busch, the usual don’t drink and drive stuff. The production company sent me a tape of the outtakes, which had me sitting belted in the cockpit, growling “You’d have to be on acid to drink and drive!”

I told Marie I’d keep my eyes open, for her sake as well as mine. Give John a kiss for me, too.

Two days home, and still I hadn’t unpacked. Wasn’t going to happen now, either, as I promised Brian I’d pay the kids a visit.

Sally opened the door and called to her daughter, that brought her flying down the stairs into my arms. We climbed the stairs to the nursery, where I found Brian and Marcel, the two most expensive race engineers in Formula One, on their knees, the result of trying to assemble the baby’s daybed. I clucked at the sight, but dived in to help.

I congratulated Marcel on his new position, and eventually inquired as to Brian’s

reason for leaving for the states.

“Don, you’ve been focusing on your job, when you do have time to look around, the only thing on your mind is all the scenery. You don’t spend a lot of time thinking about this society. You’re only looking at from the outside, I don’t expect you to worry about it. Eventually, you’ll leave and go back to America, or become a professional vacationer.

“I’ve spent just one year away from here, when I was a race engineer in Indy cars. But in that one year, I found more reason for optimism that America would be a better place for me to raise my kids, and obviously there are the career opportunities. You know Sally is from Manhattan, I can’t fault her for being a little homesick.

He held a rod as I worked a socket set. “Building race cars is a nice little cottage industry, there’ll always be work here, but the rest of the country is falling apart. Socialized medicine is a joke, the air smells, it’s too crowded, the weather is terrible.”

“Yeah, like Penske’s in Reading, Pennsylvania is a bargain in winter,” I retorted, “Not to mention one solid month in a hotel in Indy.” Still, I understood his point, the English public suffered from permanent insecurity and inferiority. It was worse than a U.S. recession, Britons were resigned to a ‘new normal’.

Either Brian was being prescient, or his wife was putting pressure on him to go back to America and he was rationalizing. I thought it was the former, either way, he was getting paid. Marcel and his wife, having decided not to have children, were happy to go where the money was, never mind the scenery, political or otherwise. He regarded Brian’s concerns on level of “What, me worry?” but he spent half the year on the Riviera, anyhow.

Thursday afternoon, I left my hotel and looked for my restaurant. Until I can find a trustworthy place to eat, I usually stick to whatever I can find in our hospitality area of the paddock. I’m not really suspicious of regional cuisine, but Simon was out for three weeks once with food poisoning, and Ken had ‘suggested’ that we stick close to what we knew.

Close to things like eel pie, I replied. No worse than head cheese or Rocky Mountain oysters, Ken retorted.

Danilio arrived soon after I, he seemed genuinely happy to talk, not necessarily about racing or my plans. We had a wonderful risotto dish for an appetizer, so good in fact that I stuck with it for the main course. That’s enough carbs for the rest of the weekend, I thought. It wasn’t until we were finishing up our two-hour lunch that I brought up the idea of me driving for them.

He allowed that they would, theoretically, be interested in someone of my caliber.

“Just make me an offer. You know what I can do in the car, you also know what type of team player I am. Take your time, find out how much I’m worth to you, I’ll let you administrators figure out the I’s and T’s.”

Of course, they were eminently satisfied with Paolo and Manuel, but he’d run this past the directors at Maranello.

“You’ll know where to find me,” I smiled, before we fought over the check.

On another front, the press was getting more intent on lulling us into complacency;

just starting the second half of the season and they had decided the championship. I was more than a little disgusted by that. Every time I heard the press or the other teams say ‘wait until next year’ or something equally brilliant made it harder for me to concentrate.

Usually I’m a fairly affable guy, not susceptible to flying off the handle when we’re misrepresented by the press. Good thing, because plenty of people become racing authorities when they’re in front of a camera with time to fill. Ever since the fates conspired to get me that sixth at Long Beach in my first Atlantic race, the most frequently used adjective in respect to me is “idiot-savant”.

Nothing pisses me off more, but not for the reasons you’d expect. Think about my parents for a second: They did the hard work raising me, giving me a well-rounded perspective about the world and the people in it, and preparing me to be a reasonably productive member of society. Then some reporter who doesn’t know me at all insults them by saying all that I’ve ever learned how to do is drive a racing car.

Maybe Mom and Dad blow it off, maybe it never gets back to them, but so what? I’m certainly not going to apologize for adapting to single-seaters the way I did; and if someone brings up (for the thousandth time) that I won in only the eighth Grand Prix I started, I’m supposed to apologize? Smile and walk away—another thing my folks taught me.

Sure, I understand racing is sexy—no one would bother calling me a savant if my only claim to fame was a successful chain of convenience stores—but damn! Call me a savant, just leave the *idiot* part out...

But while we’re at it, who says driving is easy? It could be anything from a nylon thread from my shoes poking me in the ankle for two hours (can’t do a thing about it), to the various broken bones I’ve suffered; but I don’t wake up each morning congratulating myself on how easy I make driving look.

Manuel doesn’t have the same problem, even back when he was finding novel ways to lose championships. When he wins, he makes it look like no one was *ever* on the same level as him. On the other hand, Paolo gives the impression that each lap might be his last; he’s either suicidal or bored. Then there’s the view of Jan: Fully half the press is convinced he either lucked his way into the team or he got his family to grease Ken’s palm.

The press was convinced that Jan had been freed from his team orders now that he’d been signed by Francis. Free to kick my ass, the story went. The same press that thought Jan had bought his ride also thought he’d been sandbagging! Nobody bothered asking either Jan or me about this deduction, when Jan saw the Sunday wire reports he got pissed, suggesting that the writer go back to something he knew about, like covering the royal family or soap operas. I had seen crap such as this before, besides I had enough tangible problems without going looking for trouble. But Jan was disgusted, wanting me to know he was still on board for the championships.

I waved off his concerns. “Hell, Jan, that’s why we’re the ones driving and they just sit and watch. They have lots of time to speculate and hallucinate and masturbate about what we’re doing.”

I idly wondered what next years’ opener in Australia would be like, when other teams reacted to our current performance—and I’d be on one of those teams. The thought made me

weary, blowing out my breath and running my hands through my hair absentmindedly.

One sure way to clear out the confusion was to get out on the track. We went out and did our jobs, Friday qualifying found Jan on top by five-hundredths. The other way was to call Grace.

Another batch of exhibitionist photos had arrived that morning. Outside, at her development's swimming pool. The famous lining-less swimsuit, on a smiling Grace in hip-deep water, dripping wet and nothing left to the imagination.

"Those aren't selfies..." I pointed out upon her answering the phone.

"Carol took them."

"Damn, girl!"

"She's seen more than that before," she giggled. "Then I returned the favor, Carol will give Dorian something to think about."

"Pool empty, I pray."

"Eleven on a Wednesday morning, so yeah. We would have done it even if it hadn't been empty, though!"

"You're something else." A moment passed, I wondered if she thought I was thinking about the pictures. In reality, I was contemplating the woman, and all that entailed.

The timing sucked. Not so much the distance, though that was significant. By the time my dad was thirty, he had Marie and me and a lifetime friend in Mom. When Marie hit that age, there were John and their kids, and even now they share an inside joke on the world. My turn, maybe, maybe, I've found someone, I can't be with her, to explore her quirks and personality. Even when Grace sends me things like this, I'm titillated like an eighteen-year-old, albeit with her encouragement.

Grace and I should be going on dates to the theater in Marshall, giving each other hand-jobs on her parents' couch, talking about college rather than the best way around Hartsfield and the price of apartments in London.

God, I'm old. Can anyone thirty years old really court someone, never mind the distance?

"Don, did I fuck up?" She sounded concerned, and a little uncertain. That just made it worse in my mind.

"I don't think so, even if you did, it's my problem, not yours."

"Shut up. It's ours."

"Thanks. Assuming that, also assuming that this is getting serious, what in the hell am I doing here?"

"Your life is over there, that's what. That was a soft-spoken, yet confident man I met on the plane, that's who got my nipples hard, not someone so paranoid about doing everything to please me.

"Don, honey, I'm fascinated by you, but it's just happenstance that you're a racing driver. You're defined by your career, not by whom you're dating—I'm cool with that, because I know things about you already that no one else does. Things you gave to me willingly. Besides, you love your driving too much to quit. Go, do your thing, I'll be watching, and I'll be waiting for you to come back to me. We'll have some more insightful discussion." We both

laughed at that. “But don’t even dare to think about me until you get on the plane. Go drive.”

I tried like hell to do that, really I did. With about ten minutes left in Saturday morning’s untimed practice, I decided to try one more set of tires to get to Jan’s time.

Hockenheim, as originally designed, consisted of two long straights heading into and out of the forest. Out in the wood, they were connected by a fast righthander, called Ostkurve. In the spectator area, a series of slow, twisty corners purportedly showed the ability of the drivers to control their cars. A short pit straight then led to another righthander, then back into the woods. Over the years, as the cars got faster, chicanes were added to the middle of both straights. This was a poor compromise, it was at one of these ‘safety measures’ that I had my accident two years ago. No sense whining about that, but the FIA response was to add more chicanes *in front* of the existing chicanes, and to install one at Ostkurve. I agree with the purists on their point that if the cars are going too fast, slow down the cars, don’t screw with the track. Hockenheim became a scenic, verdant slalom course, not a track on which Formula One cars or their drivers could show off.

However I still get paid to be here, and I was still disappointed to be behind Jan. Bombing down to the Ostkurve, I left my braking a little too late, the car swapped ends and jumped over the curb sideways. It rattled over the grass from one corner to the other, finally hitting the guardrail.

The first thing I did after I realized I was going off was to step on the clutch, to avoid stalling the engine. Good idea, but the rear suspensions had broken, I couldn’t get moving again. Ah well. I called Brian, unhooked, a course car pulled up and I got a ride to the pits.

The mechanics will never look at me reproachfully when this happens, like they shouldn’t talk to me or anything because I’m the high-priced professional. Elementally, they’ve got a job to do, but also I don’t do this to them regularly. Brian and Simon debriefed me as to what happened, they didn’t question it, either. Everyone scurried around to get my spare ready for actual qualifying, but we all still had time for lunch in the interval.

Jan told us he thought the Ostkurve sucked as well. When the chicane was put in, there was a bump between the old and new pavement, as the day got hotter, the bump became worse.

“How are the Ferraris handling it?” I asked.

“Not going fast enough for it to bother them,” Simon replied, not looking up from his terminal.

I had to dial my spare in during qualifying, while Jan planned on waiting until the end of the session to set his time, for shadows to cross the track and make the car grip better. I could just about kiss the pole goodbye but the better part of me was concerned with getting the spare right.

To my surprise and eternal gratitude, Jan volunteered to go out and draft me early in the session, he figured his spare could use some work, too. It was no use, however, I had understeer, meaning I had to go slower in the corners than Jan, he was having to slow in the corners in order for me to keep up. I yelled thanks over the radio to him, then pulled into the

pits. Every other team was waiting for the end of the hour, too, so the press focused on the activity in our pit. Brian and Simon hunched over my car, trying to decide how to dial out the understeer, there were various means to do so. Some took more time than others, since we had horsepower to burn, so to speak, we decided just to put more front wing on the car.

Ten minutes left, off we went, Jan towing me again. Soft tires on, they'd last about four laps, that'd be time enough. The radio reception in the woods was bad enough that I could only hear my times going past the pits, so I just stepped on the gas and let shit happen.

No time for subtlety, letting the car drift over to, then over the curbs, tucking in under Jan's wing down the straights. That was a lot better, but qualifying ended with Jan on the pole by the same gap as in untimed practice.

I cruise-controlled answers to the press' questions; just one of those days and all. And through the remainder of Saturday night, I spent a remarkably small amount of time wondering about the spin. It was obvious to me what was occupying my thoughts—Grace—and Ferrari. Time to table that and get some sleep.

Jan and I did settle on one small modification of our tactics, in light of the diminished threat from Ferrari. If Jan made a significantly better start, and if there were no other dramas, then I'd ride to second. No waving past, no tricks, as long as Ken got his fifteen points.

Even though we had the best cars, that didn't exempt us from stopping for tires like everyone else. I pitted from second after fifteen laps, got back in fifth. I had gone in a little early, confident that I could pace myself with the decreasing fuel load, and avoid the rush that was expected between laps nineteen and twenty-one.

With everyone else's stops out of the way, I was second, but by about fifteen seconds, rather than the three I had been. Jan was holding his stop awfully long, maybe in an attempt to go without one. I might have made such a decision when I was his age—but I would have been wrong; we had the field covered anyhow.

Lap twenty-five, the gap had fallen to twelve seconds, a lap later, it was nine. The lap after that, I could see the gap as I was confronted by a cloud of gravel at the Ostkurve, Jan's car barely crawling out of the sand trap, his tires shot. Though I was in the lead, I spared a second of thought for his predicament, some things you can't tell people.

Jan pitted, came out in fourth. Since he had an ever-lightening fuel load and new tires, he started moving up. Remembering our agreement not to push it, my first was safe.

So, ten laps left, I had forty-five seconds on the group of Jan and the Ferraris, I was waiting for the checker, so to speak. Short-shifting, keeping off the curbs, listening for any noises.

Chicanes aside, flying down the straights at Hockenheim is one of the few times where the impression of sheer speed overcomes, fleetingly, the work I'm doing behind the wheel. The forest is a green tunnel, it's almost to point of inducing vertigo. I go slightly faster at Ricard, but the sand and low grass there mean you and your car are the highest point on the track, which makes it seem more safe, more normal. Comparatively.

I was letting the back-markers unlap themselves from me. No sense in getting caught in any race they might be having, I had my agenda, they had theirs. Which I promptly

screwed up—the lapped car in front was going out of his way to let me by while I was in no hurry, result was that we wound up at the same point in the corner at the same time.

My front tire slammed into the lapped car's rear tire square, we were going slow enough that I didn't go over the top, I guess I should be thankful for small favors. What the fuck happened, I asked myself, as I tried everything I knew to keep from getting stuck in the gravel. It seemed like laps passed, but I finally rocked and spun my car away.

I was pissed. Yes, I had been in my second wreck of the weekend, but I had no idea about how I got in this one!

The crew had already seen my shunt on their monitors, Brian was trying to radio me as I came out of the forest. I had a right front flat, suspension damage, something rattling around in the rear that I couldn't pin down, as I was missing a mirror.

The crew was used to six-second pit stops from me, but this took more than thirty. The guys jumped on the car, Marcel and Brian kicked the right front wheel off the car, other mechanics unfastened the front wing assembly and stuck another one on. Four more tires, the mechanics fell back from the wheels, Brian screamed for me to get out. Thirty seconds doesn't seem like a lot, but it was long enough for me to reflect that those guys were focused, they wanted to win the race, they weren't the ones spacing off.

My car was still a handful, wanting to turn right going in a straight line, I had to throw the rear out in lefthanders. The engine sounded like there was a cat in the crankcase, so I wasn't too startled when it blew. Naturally, it was at the same chicane where I'd wrecked earlier today, also my wreck two years ago. The usual suspects will be making a big deal of this in the press, I grumbled to myself as I unstrapped. Goddamn, I had made it to the finish of every race this year until now, with the exception of Ricard, and I didn't have Lacroix to blame for this one.

I walked toward the pits, arriving as the race ended. I wasn't able to see both Ferraris blow, leaving Jan to drone around unmolested for his second win. Nine points after visiting the gravel, not bad; even better for Ken.

Some of my guys formed a shield in case I didn't want to listen to the press, but my acting like an asshole wouldn't make things any better. I didn't want to shut them out, sooner or later I'd have to talk. I motioned to my mechanics, then turned to the crowd.

"Guys, I'll answer anything you want to ask, but give me a minute with my team, so I can get civil." I looked at my shoelaces, my legs felt as if they were sinking into the concrete. I vaguely heard camera shutters going off, reporters smirking, or fretting, depending on their opinion of me. "I'll have to think up an excuse," I smirked, the laughter I heard made me feel better.

I walked through the garage, looking for a place to be alone for a second. I opened a door to the hallway just in time to duck a flying helmet impacting against the wall. "Shit, Don," Jan looked at me, his face white. He appeared like a kid caught reading Playboys, I had to smile at our predicament.

Sure, he had won the race, but in the worst possible way. "Luck, just dumb luck," he spat. "By rights, I'd have been watching the rest of the race from the pits."

"You? I thought I knew how to drive a car by now."

Brian and Marcel to rooted us out. The looks on our faces told them we didn't need to be talked to, but Brian couldn't resist.

"Who was driving that car? Couldn't have been you, that's for damn sure."

Marcel to Jan: "When you have a shitcar and you're trying to steal a place, then staying out is a good idea. That doesn't mean not pitting when you've got the best car on the track. Goddamn."

It was serious enough, we knew that, but Brian and Marcel began to smile around the edges. I didn't want to forget this, I wasn't interested in any laughs from them, or Ken either, as he came over to get us. "Man, I was just lucky I didn't fly over that other guy."

"Just means you're human," Ken replied. "Look at it this way. Sixteen races, and testing besides. This is just one weekend—and probably the only one."

"They're probably looking for Jan on the podium. Cheer up or else, you two." Ken had a way of making things seem less weighty, I wondered what things would be like in the paddock without him. "I'll just take it out of your paychecks!"

I went to the mechanics, told them I was sorry for wrecking their car, I honestly appreciated the work they had put into fixing my cars and getting me back in the race. After Jan got done on the podium, he would say much the same thing, I knew.

I apologized to the owner and driver of the car I hit, they were more charitable than I had a right to expect ("Hey everybody, *Don Peterson* hit my car!"). Only then did I go back and meet the reporters.

"I was hoping this would have been a quiet weekend," I began. "I screwed up, open and shut. The car was fine, the other guy was minding his own business, No reason why he should have to mind mine, I just didn't do my job." And I didn't know why.

I rubbed my eyes. My adrenaline was totally gone, so I wasn't acting pissed or depressed, just tired. I yawned, that could have been the sign of me being bored, but when I didn't resume talking, the writers knew I was deeply disgusted.

God, I was hot. It was ten degrees warmer in Silverstone, but I got out of the car there fresh as a daisy, and with perfect hair. I was sure I looked like a wino, just as I knew I drove like a blue-hair.

Finally, I spoke. "My team has gone schizo for me this year, unfortunately, the nut behind the wheel broke today. I didn't deserve my car today, and that pisses me off. But Ken told me the same thing he would tell the mechanics in this circumstance: Shit happens. He considers this weekend to be over, I'll try to do the same."

This was in no way a rationalization, but any other driver would have gone to their garage, no questions or answers, and their public relations coordinator would release a statement about an hour later.

If they over-revved the engine, it became a bad set of valve springs; if they hit too many curbs, it was a handling deficiency; if they ran over someone, that was because the driver in front missed a gear. Not me, not Jan either. We do have a PR lady, but our frankness means she hasn't much to do, she and Jan usually discuss EU politics with the racing journalists.

I came across Zancana as he supervised the loading of his transporters. "Maybe my

bosses have a deal going, they've been on to the phone to Fiat all weekend. Same email?

Maybe things would be all right, maybe this negotiation would be painless. However, I was so dissipated that I could barely show enthusiasm.

"Sorry I'm not more pleasant company." I was sniffing now, maybe I had caught a cold, my luck it was when Grace and I had been trysting on the hotel balcony. Paranoid. I had to get to Frankfurt, it didn't matter whether by land or air, both avenues were crowded. Then I would have to withstand another nine hours on an airplane. Finally, I wasn't exactly proud of my effort this weekend.

"This is a tough line of work," Danilo reminded me. "I've a helicopter, Frankfurt isn't that much of a diversion. Like a lift?"

The hallmark of a great driver is the ability to make quick and correct decisions, so of course I jumped. At least I was moving, getting away from the track and marginally closer to Grace.

Severe thunderstorms in Amsterdam meant that I rolled into Atlanta after midnight, so back to the Renaissance. I killed time Monday morning at a Waffle House, waiting for Grace to get to work. I made sure I had a large breakfast, more than I'd usually eat, but my stomach still acted like it was empty, and I was in a cold sweat.

I hadn't felt this weird since I stayed up all night studying in college. Mainlining Dexatrim, still jittery, but wide awake, and never able to get to sleep when I was ready.

A little past nine, I pulled into her parking lot. The sprinklers had just shut off, humid air rose off the asphalt. Carol was glad to see me, and said Grace would be off a phone call soon. We could hear her through several partitions, she was patiently carrot-and-sticking one of her managers through an operational problem.

Her voice was firm, but conversational and friendly. From her half of the conversation, I could sense that she was letting the other person figure the solution as much as Grace actually telling them what to do.

"Yeah, Beth...We ain't like that coffee shop you used to work for...I'm here to make your job easier and to treat you like an adult...Carol told me you're kicking ass and I think so, too. Lemme buy y'all lunch tomorrow...Bee-Dubs in Roswell? I can find it. C-ya, Bethie!"

Grace wandered out into the hallway when she was done, humming to herself, still unaware of my presence. "Carol, she called me in tears, and when I was done, she was in tears again!" She felt as good as I felt lousy. Carol whistled toward her, Grace turned around, saw me, gave a little squeak.

"Hi, honey," she hugged me, pushing me back onto the reception desk. After a thirty-second kiss and several clucks from Carol, she pulled back and fussed with my tie. "Don, you look like shit."

"Wish I could say the same about you," I smirked back, but without much enthusiasm. Man, I needed some sleep. I stared into space, to wit, the space occupied by the neckline of her dress. I tried not to stare, to maintain an intelligent dialogue with Grace and Carol, but I was just too worn out. The next thing I knew, I felt Grace's finger touch the end of my chin, moving my gaze upward.

“Yoo-hoo,” she whispered, but loud enough for Carol to hear.

“You did it again, Grace,” Carol chuckled. “The Valley of Death. Guaranteed to stop baseball games cold...”

“Or turn successful race drivers into lobotomized pussy-whips,” I retorted. Grace squeezed my hand in approval.

“Did you watch the race?” I sighed, wondering who else in her circle of friends had.

“No, dumbfuck, I watched Joel Osteen. Of course I did. What was with that shit, anyway?” She looked at me with mock disgust. “Some half-assed race driver once told me that the first thing you should know about your car is how much brake pressure it takes to lock up your tires.”

Naturally, since I had no explanation for myself, I had none for anyone else. I held my hands out, looked away disgustedly.

“Carol, I need to talk to Rob Zombie for a few minutes.” Grace then took me by the hand and led me out to the lobby of the building.

I knew she had something to say, I took a breath and willed myself to concentrate. I wrung my hands nervously, tapping my toes.

“Don, I’m serious,” she began, her hands actually on her hips. She looked indignant, more likely it was concern. “I gotta know, what in the hell was on your mind this weekend?”

“Since when did you become a team manager?” I wasn’t trying to be smart, but it was the first thing that popped out. She looked at me like I was trying to change the subject, so I quickly continued. “I really thought I was concentrating. To hell with that—I was focused. I know it...that’s what I do.” The more I talked, the more I became annoyed by what happened all over again, just like after the race.

“The press already have it figured out, the pressure of the championship is getting to me. I think I’ll run with that.”

“La-di-da. I won’t.”

Alarm bells were going off in my head, I wanted to pound it with my fists. I reminded myself of Jan throwing his helmet.

“I’ll give you three reasons,” I began. “First, yeah, the championship. I tried to take it easy, I shouldn’t have done that. Second, Ferrari called, we talked. Third—”

“Grace, that’s what,” she finished. “You have to admit, it’s a hell of a coincidence. I know you haven’t been, well, busy. I’m in your life, and you go and wreck a pair of cars.” She tried to say that in a steady voice, like it was just another hypothesis. As far as I was concerned, that’s all it was, and an incorrect one at that.

“When I get in the car, everything else goes away. What I did the weekend before is out of my mind until I get out.”

“Hey, that sounds macho enough.”

I whirled away, I wanted to take the house key she had just slipped me and chuck it across the parking lot. She pushed my buttons, got on my ass just like my sister. And just like Marie, I wanted to show her up, because there was some kind of truth to her statement.

“Grace, you have to understand. I honestly thought that I was ready. There’s a difference between taking it easy and phoning it in. After the first wreck, I still felt that way.

I couldn't pinpoint my mind wandering then, and I sure as hell could not after the second one."

When I look at this with a detached point of view, I have to admit that I could have been wrong, I wasn't concentrating. But I can't be detached. I need a little arrogance, faith. It just wasn't my day, bad karma or something, but I *was* kicking ass, I *was* doing my job."

"So, Don, when you are in the car, I don't exist?" Grace asked, her eyebrow arching.

"Grace who?"

She seemed satisfied, also pleased that I could defend my position. I was pulled into her grasp, receiving another smooch. She had to hit the studios that day, no getting around it, so she reminded me of the house keys. "You can go and warm up the bed," she supposed, "or you can stay here and hit on Carol the rest of the day until I get back?"

"Really, I'm not that tired," I protested, "though it does look to be a comfortable couch."

Carol threw up her hands. "I don't want him sleeping in *my* lobby!"

Grace smiled at me maternally, I finally pocketed her keys, drove to her house, walked the dog, turned on Bloomberg and fell asleep.

The garage door awoke us about five-thirty, I barely made it to my feet as Grace came in the house. "Not sleepy, right?" she observed.

"No, not at all," I rolled my eyes.

She did the dog, mail, fridge thing. Which turned into the wine thing.

"TBS had 'Grand Prix' on last night."

"Yep, ol' Pete Aaron on the high banks of Monza."

"Was that anywhere close to reality, or was the movie too romantic?" She brought me a soda, sat next to me, waited for me to get philosophical.

"Well, racing movies are either over-romantic, too macho, or Elvis movies." Grace laughed as I continued. "But in that movie, the drivers actually had time to plan how they'd sleep with each others' girlfriends, had social lives, hung out together. Maybe it was slower back then, more time for friends and romance, though I think it was some writer's imagination. That's not to admit that it wasn't a good story, and the scenery was great." Ferraris with wire wheels, spaghetti exhaust pipes, skidding all over the place, with no wings or ground effects. And you could actually race at Monaco!

"And 'Le Mans', too. Didn't even try to be romantic, and if you thought it was macho, you're sick. McQueen was a racer, he played it like one. Kinda minimalist, the movie let the race cars do the talking. God, those 917K Gulf-Porsches, I used to think there would never be a more...perfect car than them. But those were the days when you'd lose three or four of your heroes each season, and consider it part of the 'sport'."

"Have you ever driven there?"

"Nope, I refuse to race at night." She looked at me funny. "I may be stupid, but I'm not crazy! Mulsanne straight is a ball-buster, longer than even Ricard. It could rain, someone could dump their oil pan, one of the touring class cars could be wandering out in the middle of the track, stray children—I'm not being funny. If it's dark, you won't see it, forget about reacting. No thanks, I'll stick to something safe."

She looked into the spare bedroom, noticed that the comforter hadn't been touched. "How come you didn't sleep in here?" she pouted.

"I wasn't sleeping, I told you." We grinned.

Her nylons rustled as she settled next to me, it sounded like a sigh, one of relaxation, anticipation, perhaps. Sitting as she was, facing me, arms in front of her, her cleavage came up to her neck.

"I'm sorry I was staring this morning," I said, making an effort to look directly into her eyes. It really wasn't that difficult.

"Why? I'm not," she replied evenly. "I didn't wear that by accident. I just wish you had been able to focus fully on me, I regret that you weren't able to concentrate."

"I'm awake now," I looked at her optimistically, gratified when she laughed and kissed me.

"What's the deal with décolletage, anyhow?" I wondered, deciding to ask an expert. "You wouldn't call a man with his shirt open down to his navel professionally dressed, but a generous amount of skin is considered sorta normal for a woman."

"Excuse me, I didn't think you were complaining?" Her own gaze moved from my face to her breasts and back again.

"Well, no, but I'm really disgusted by any whiff of sexism or any idea that the women in an office are window-dressing. Your dress ain't cheap, certainly more expensive than an Oxford shirt and tie."

"Listen: I'm the boss, so I decide what the atmosphere is going to be. If you feel that you have to be deferential to the men in your office, then you're screwed already. And that's a fucked-up dynamic from the get-go if a woman *owns* the damn place. I am absolutely in love with body, I enjoy showing it off, if anyone else likes it, fine. It's a trademark of mine, although not my only one. If people like to come to work just to see what I'm wearing, great. Everyone knows that all they'll get is a look, the people that can handle that are still here. The ones that fixated on it, that couldn't do their work, are somewhere else now."

Though I'm sure she had researched this point of view, it didn't come across as a recitation. I appreciated the time it took for her to decide this about herself.

"How did you get so self-confident?" I wondered.

"Well, I told you a little about my usual childhood. But when I was about seventeen, I had come across one of those self-improvement articles, the bent of it was to visualize myself toward thinness by standing naked in front of a full-length mirror each day and crap like that.

"The next Sunday morning, I did just that. First day of the rest of your life and all that. Up in my room, off came the towel, I checked out one part, then another...didn't come out 'til dinner!"

I could imagine. Jesus, could I imagine.

"Ever since then, if people like me, fine. If not, fuck them. I'm not going to hide myself." Good.

"Don't they have girls like me back home? Corn-fed?"

"Sure, but you know every good farmer rotates his crops, his daughters are no exception. This year's corn-fed girl is next year's soybean-fed one. You want to be around

someone who eats beans all the time?”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Okay, I don’t like to dredge up my past, but there was this one lady. About half-Scandinavian, the opera singer-milkmaid type. Pick your adjective; queen-sized, zaftig, whatever. Really nice girl, except for our first date. I had just started junior year, she already was out of school.”

Grace chuckled, but it really wasn’t funny. “We’re at the Carrollton Drive-in, in the back seat of her Cordoba. She was as acquiescent about me feeling her up as I was anxious. Anyhow, I got under her bra, her breasts were cupped in my hands, one heartbeat, two,”

“Then what?”

“I had an accident,” I replied in a matter-of-fact tone, smiling only when Grace began coughing from laughing so hard. “After a while, she took it as sort of a compliment, but before—she was pissed. She wanted to get laid, goddammit, and I’d sort of started—and finished—without her.

“Again, by the end of the week Marie and her were getting a laugh out of it, but that night, she wouldn’t drive me home until I’d made it up to her, a few times over. She finally dropped me off Sunday morning on her way to church. I slept the rest of the day, that was work!

I sighed, as Grace looked at me and grinned. “I can put myself in her position, can understand why she acted that way. She lives with her breasts, and here was this guy going nuts about them, and basically ignoring the rest of her. She probably wished I wasn’t as, well, focused, I guess.”

“You seem to have mastered the skill of proportionate response,” she allowed. “I’m totally thankful, too.”

“Doesn’t your back hurt from all of you?”

“That’s what the wine is for! Really, one of my sisters-in-law is nowhere near this big and she had to have her vertebrae fused. Besides, I have this cute little tummy to prop them up. If all I did was sit on the couch all day eating Fritos and watching soap operas, then I’d probably be in trouble.”

I squeezed her tight. “It’s so much fun going out with someone with no emotional baggage, who is bright enough not to let their previous life weigh them down.”

“I don’t want to sound arrogant, but I’m the best lady you’ll ever have.”

“I understand completely. I don’t think you’re bragging. And I want to bust my ass to keep up with you.”

Next morning, I kissed Grace goodbye in her driveway, then I aimed my car south to find Decker’s shop in East Point. The drive down U.S. 29 took me past small garage-gas stations boarded up, targets for arsonists. Further south, the scenery changed again; chain stores, fast food. Traditional-looking churches, well-kept homes, mature trees. At one time these were separate towns, destined to become Atlanta’s first suburbs.

Decker’s shop was a brown brick building, with a sheet-metal addition that extended to a new-looking loading dock. I spotted the car hauler I had run across last trip, except for the

paint job on the trailer, no one would have any inkling of what went on here.

About that paint job: Nice, conservative Roman lettering, 'Decker Racing Stables' over the goose-neck I smiled to myself, then I heard Robert laughing behind me. "You know that schmuck on CBS who called every race team 'Junior Johnson's racing stables' or 'Enzo Ferrari's', whatever." He had read my mind, I wish some commentators would do a little less filling of dead air sometimes.

"Nice, cozy place," I commented. "No wasted space, the lease is probably dirt, no landscaping, no unnecessary attention."

"Got a tax abatement to boot," Robert added. "Inner-city and all." He showed me around, dyno, paint booth, fab shop where a couple of chassis were being rebuilt. So far these were all customer cars I'd seen, now I focused on a tube-frame sitting on shop wheels in a corner; Decker's first Cup chassis.

"The busier I am, the less time I have to screw with it," he explained. "I can either make money or go racing!"

Some of his employees were also racers, fully half the cars in the corners of the shop were spare-time efforts. Keeping the paychecks in the company store, so to speak. He also had a burgeoning over-the-counter business, that's where we headed next.

The showroom reminded me of an upscale version of Dad's store. But no replacement cigarette lighters or fuzzy dice here, rather the shelves were filled with nitrous injection kits, replacement computer chips, and race engines that bore little resemblance to the 350 in your mom's Malibu wagon. Some things were the same, like the red vinyl stools propping up gearheads discussing cars and racing with the salespeople.

Robert introduced me, and for a bunch of Saturday-night dirt-eaters, they had a serviceable knowledge of Grand Prix racing.

"Cold crying Christ, Don," a skinny kid with stringy blond hair said, "What is that moron Lacroix doing? Last time I looked, Formula One was doing just fine without that loser sticking his nose in everything."

Although he looked about twenty, he had an intelligent but cynical look beyond his years. The look of Grand Prix racing fans the world over, I reminded myself.

"No kidding. Nothing like fixing something that ain't broke." This from a black man about my age, dressed as good as I was. He could have been a salesman for Coca-Cola for all I knew, but the calluses on his hands showed he didn't watch television for a hobby. "What's next? Curb feelers and Jesus lights?"

They knew of me, the travel and money, but it never came up, racing was the thing we had in common, not dying with the most toys. Thirty some-odd million bucks and three hundred pressmen got in the way of the important things, like technique and initiative and desire.

This comradeship wasn't limited to just racing; I had heard the same enthusiasm and passion from Ken discussing his wine cellar, Simon and his collection of World War II propaganda posters, even from farmers back home. Any endeavor where science, art, sport and business became something bordering on love.

In an instant, three hours had passed, I tore myself away with regret to go back to

Grace's office. Decker told me to get back to my sweetie, I laughed as I got back in the Focus.

I had blown off lunch, Grace was a little pissed by that. I gave her a puppy-dog look, and that brightened her up. I called Marie at the office, by coincidence Max Anschutz was there talking with her.

He got on the line: "For crying out loud, Don, trying to understand British English is one thing, now I've got contracts of yours coming in Italian," he complained good-naturedly. I put him on the speaker as he emailed the .pdf docs to me.

"Getting a taste for grits yet?"

"No, Grace bathes," I replied, she hit me on the shoulder.

One copy in English, one in Italian. I read the latter from my tablet, both because I could read it, and also because that would be the original, no loss in translation. Grace read the English version off a projector, clucking when she came across a fault in the grammar.

She read over a paragraph of the contract. "Jesus, look at all these riders."

"It's pretty standard stuff, although Ken didn't bother putting it in our contracts." I read off the list. "I can't drive other races, no Le Mans, no Indy, no snowmobiles, no riding lawnmowers. Big whoop. I also can't drive any non-production cars on the street, that keeps me off hot-rods and go-karts. It follows then that I can't drive production cars off-road.

"Also, no flying in single-engine airplanes, no aircraft with only one pilot. No intramural or organized sport other than driving for Ferrari, either, so I can't break my leg hang-gliding or in a pickup basketball game. I can watch sporting events, but only in areas designated as spectator areas, so if I want to watch sprints in Sedalia, I have to be in the stands, not the pits.

I studied further in the pact, I would be contracted by Fiat, then 'assigned' to Ferrari. "That way, they don't have me sticking my nose in the administration. Hate to tell them, I'm not interested in anything other than driving."

"Yeah, shut up and take your money," Grace mentioned. She then whistled when she got to the next paragraph, my compensation.

"Forty-one million dollars," Grace removed the uncertainty. "Well, fuck me."

That's one way of putting it. I looked at it rationally, from a business standpoint. I hopefully would bring the championship-winning driver to the team, clout such as that should count for something. I figured a part of the amount was to keep me happy about the running of the team, though I had figured that my forced exile from Francis would have reduced my bargaining position. What bargaining, I thought, this was almost too easy!

"Don't be so calculating about this, Don," Grace bubbled. "Forty-one mil and the team you always wanted. Is this cool or what?"

"Yeah, this is as close to a blank check as I could hope for." But what I was really thinking was that my immediate future would have me flying pond-hoppers fifteen or twenty times in the next year, just so Grace could wrap me in her legs and tell me how much she missed me. Ah, well.

"I'd be a moron not to jump on this. I will have to thank Francis for moving the market."

And so the afternoon wound into the evening, Grace singing a happy tune while I

brooded, both oblivious to the other. Yeah, you could make the case that I had just received a raise and promotion, so I should be happy. But what a commute!

Grace had invited me to escort her to dinner and dancing thrown by a small business association of the metro area. I figured I should at least be civil, to not embarrass her. Certainly, I didn't have a problem with being on her arm in public, and I also looked forward to meeting other people facing the same challenges the family was back home.

But all I want to do is socialize, I told her. Just one self-important motivational speaker or tedious seminar, and I was heading home.

"Are you kidding?" she laughed. "No one is going to this to learn anything, that detracts from the party!"

I had brought over my gray Nino Cerruti, but that wasn't a match aesthetically for Grace's white bustier worn under a matching sheer blouse and harem pants. I made the observation that we looked as if we were going to different parties, but she waved that off.

"There will be people in jogging pants, jeans, even one or two networkers sucking up by wearing penguin suits," she assured me. "If anyone calls us out on it, I'll just tell them that I picked you up in the bar!"

The ball was at the Renaissance at—where else—the airport, and it soon became apparent that this was indeed a shoot-the-bull session and an excuse to get buzzed, dance, and crash upstairs in your room. There was a buffet, no need for haute cuisine when everyone was too busy rubbernecking and yakking to enjoy the food.

And Grace was right, she was far from the most conspicuously dressed woman there, though she was of course the prettiest.

"This sort of reminds me of the FIA party to kick off a race weekend," I decided. "I usually just duck in for a half-hour, there's stuff I'd rather spend more time on. The best-dressed men are from the various television networks, trying to get one of us on-camera."

"And the women—shit, every porn star and call girl from western Europe, wannabe pop singers, professional mistresses. You've never seen a fishing show like that on Saturday afternoon television." I reappraised Grace's outfit, she smiled while she awaited my verdict. "You'd pass for a nun," I concluded.

"So what do you do before a race?"

"You mean besides call you? I play some tapes, do some letters on my laptop. Listen to the BBC for some news. If the folks have sent me some Cardinal games, I'll watch those with Jan."

"What I mean is, do you abstain from floozies?" she chided.

"How much do you want to hear?"

"Enough," she smirked.

"I haven't partaken of any bimbos thrown at me in ages. I have other things I want to do more than that." Okay, less than two months with Grace, and it was strange to think of companionship before her. The absurdity of her asking about other women!

About half the people knew Grace from around town or through their respective business dealings. She introduced me just by name, a few made a connection just from that, and only a subset of them were race fans. Even they just shook my hand and happily moved

on after a few minutes. I clearly was there as Grace's date, that suited me. I was able to watch how she interacted with others on what was her own turf.

She was getting paper cuts from dealing out business cards. To hear anyone else say "I'll call you Monday," or "come out to the office, yep, Atlantic Station now" would have sounded clichéd, a parody of how business people are portrayed. But she was brutally honest, she looked like she could have done this all night.

"I'm glad that I asked your advice for next year," I told her as the hotel staff shooed us out a little past midnight. "You live to deal, you're good at it."

"Yep, and now I'm dealing you back to Europe for God knows how many years. I wish I wasn't that good sometimes." She was coming down and it was sad to see.

I'm not an idiot, I knew what she meant, but until now I'd thought I was the only one with a problem with it. Okay, we'd kept it to ourselves, but I knew we wouldn't grow if we didn't discuss it. Problem was, this wasn't the best of times to have an all-nighter to plan our futures. She had to fly to Tulsa for an opening, and I was expected back in Brunswick. But was there ever going to be a good time?

We drove back to her house silently, my brain running too many programs to turn to look at her. I wonder if she thought she had said too much and now she thinks I suspect her of trying to rope me in? Was she reading my silence as my reaction? Why couldn't I talk?

As soon as we got inside her kitchen, she turned and held me for a long time, before she finally spoke. "I'm sorry I said that," she whispered, choking on her words. "If I make you quit what you're doing, I might as well kill you. And yet, my ego is healthy to the point to hope you would entertain the thought."

"I love having you with me, can't countenance you leaving every week or so, but I'd hate even more to catch you early Sunday morning watching the Grands Prix and know that you missed it."

Too many mistresses, I thought. A red car in Italy, a bank account in Missouri, this lady crying in my arms. But she was right, I'd be bouncing off the ceiling without any of those things.

"Grace," I began, "please don't apologize for feeling the way you do. Now I was having trouble, too." I never thought I'd find someone like you."

She answered, "I could be really selfish, really stupid, and *insist* you never leave me. I could rationalize that by calling it love."

"What scares me is that you might say yes."

"Sweetheart, I love you," I looked in her eyes. "I know that someday that will be enough, but...it isn't, now. I pray that I'm doing the right thing, that we're not delaying anything, five years from now I hope that we look at this time as just adjustment."

Her makeup was long gone. "Sunday morning, after the reunion, I went in to check on you, you rolled over in your sleep, but you had this look on your face—it wasn't a satisfied look, but one of, well, relief. Like you had been days without water, your life had been given back to you."

I pictured what she described. "That was it, you mean that much to me."

"Then, I will just have to continue feeling that good with you here, and as shitty when

you're gone." She looked up with a resolved expression. "Any growing in this relationship will be inside our own heads, not measurable in how much time we spend together."

"Is it getting any easier?" Marie was acting sympathetic the next afternoon, as we sipped sodas on the sidewalk outside the store.

"Grace? Not really, and thank God for that," I admitted.

"Did you and Max get the contract figured out?"

"Yeah, there's no reason not to accept it," I told her.

"What about Grace?"

"She's the one who put it into perspective, and told me to get on it."

"Jesus Christ, Don." She looked annoyed. "I never thought you'd fall for someone and still race over there."

"Now I'm confused. A couple of days ago, you were in my face to make sure she didn't wander off," I protested.

"Sure, I gave you shit for not getting attached, but that was it, I was just razzing you. But keeping her hanging on while you bum-rush Europe nine months a year...I'm not too thrilled about it, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. I thought any girlfriend of yours would understand that."

"Meaning that they would get bored," I snorted. "Meaning, they'll leave after a while—after a few laughs and a couple orgasms and some of my money. You know damn well I saw that movie, and I became a man when that shit started getting old!"

"Grace and I feel that we can do it, have our cake and whatever. We're both complete, confident people, and I guess that is what attracted us. But now that we're found each other, that doesn't mean that our lives previously were shit. We can't just drop everything now that we have something going." I grabbed Marie's free hand, and she squeezed it.

She was thinking hard, so I leaned back and waited. I smelled the river. God, it was hot.

"I used to hate when John had to leave, even though he never gets more than two hours away from here. That girl must have some balls. Ovaries. Shit."

"No more or less than you," I replied. "Different circumstances. She's not you, I'm not John. It was really easy to want a life like yours, but I like the one I have and I love the struggle." And on some days I convince myself of that. "Grace seems to think we can do this long-distance, and she made me believe, too. And," I squinted into the sun, "I can't believe how happy I am."

Maybe I even convinced *her*. Truth to tell, what I wanted to do more than anything was to get this contract business behind me, get back to resolution and routine, and see Grace and I take this fork *out* of our road.

"Well, good luck to ya, Gunga Din." She blew out a breath, pulled me up from the curb. "See you at dinner. And, you are loved, despite how I sound."

"I know that."

I walked into Max Anschutz' office, shocked by the air conditioning. He had no problems with the contract though like me, he found the part about Fiat and 'personal

services' to be a little aberrant.

"They don't want you to know something," he inferred from that. "Have they always been so secretive? You're more up on their history."

"They've always been a little cagey, paranoid sometimes, about their administration," I allowed. "To be precise, they're famous for it. They cultivate it."

But my relative enthusiasm was good enough for Max, however. He figured I knew what I was doing, the contract looked thorough. From a legal standpoint, Max signed off on it.

From an emotional remove, Marie had signed off on me. So there.

I put the papers in my briefcase, and practically skipped down the sidewalk. My talk with Grace was bearing fruit already, I was excited about next year, and looking forward to Spa and the rest of the season, to give Ken the sendoff he deserved. "At the very least, Max," I told him as I made my leave, "It'll be my name and white '1' on the nose next year. And a girlfriend who wants me to drive it. All this and a paycheck!"

Belgium:

Upon my arrival back in London, I rang Ferrari. We agreed on signing the contracts in Maranello on Wednesday, then I went to Ken's to tell him my decision out of courtesy.

"Don, I wish we could have ended this better," he told me as we discussed my contract over a glass of wine. "You certainly aren't defecting...sometimes I feel like I'm running out on you."

"I hope you don't believe that," I scolded him. "Big picture—look after yourself for once."

This was going to be a huge mess by the end of the year, I thought. Obviously, the team, from the janitors on up, are working their asses off for this year's championships. But Ken's a lame duck, albeit one with loyal people working for him.

Conversely, the idea of Francis running things elicits reactions ranging from professional ambivalence (Marcel, Simon), to unbridled enthusiasm (Jan), updating one's resume (Brian, Sanjay), to diplomatic disgust (yoo-hoo).

Where some of our sponsors were enthusiastic about the Francis/van Bemmelen combination, the ones that I'd brought weren't necessarily convinced without prudent reservation about the appeal of Francis' team without me. Similarly, not every sponsor of mine would have the same synergies with Ferrari as they did with Ken.

Shell was safe, Ferrari was already supplied by them. Coca-Cola sponsors damn near every driver already, with associate sponsorship of their teams. On the other hand, Gordon MacDonald laughed when I mentioned the deal. "Shit, Don, can you imagine those wine-swilling Italians allowing an American beer company decal on their car? No fucking way. Call me when you get back to St. Louis, we'll throw you a party!"

Sola Stella decided to come see me in London Tuesday, due to my inability to go to

them this summer. While Ferrari had their sponsors tied up for years, I wouldn't mind some personal sponsorship and SSC was glad to oblige. They were already making a healthy chunk off of Pump 'n Run and they liked how I mentioned them to other business owners and entrepreneurs, that value for money proposition again.

But one of their senior VPs surprised me over a long lunch by informing me that they were also going to continue their sponsorship with Francis and expand their personal sponsorships to include Jan! He had learned how to network growing up, after all...

However, Ford had a problem that money couldn't fix. Their 'hometown boy'—or at least his team—was probably bringing back the championship, but I was running to Brand X as soon as the season was done. No off-season marketing possible, kinda silly to have me in their ads.

Which brought up another point: Would Ford use Hazlett for development the rest of the year, therefore enabling Francis to refine the chassis and then beat the Ford-engined teams next year? Any other year, we'd have tested before Hockenheim, between Spain and Hungary, and an extra day before Monza. With all the controversy and subterfuge, Jan and I had time on our hands, not like Grace had minded.

But, as Jan and I discussed over dinner, next year was next year. I couldn't find a downside, we'd both have prohibitive chances of winning a ton of races next year. Nothing was guaranteed, remember the testing problem; but our respective chances were as good as anyones. I was looking forward to some classic races with him next year, when we didn't have to worry about fifteen points for Ken anymore, just going balls-out.

On Wednesday afternoon, I was in Maranello to sign the contract. The ceremony was telecast live in Italy, although Ferrari had arranged it that there would be no press conference, that would be the next day at Spa.

And *that* was interesting, with me trying to diplomatically voice my decision for ducking out on Francis without turning it into a mud-slinging session. I answered the usual questions about my motivation and hopes for next year.

A question came up about my teammate, would there be co-number ones or a one and two. "Hell, I'm just driving the things, leave me out of this!" I roared, drawing a laugh from the press, who knew the truth was more involved than that.

Zancana spoke up: "It has always been the policy of Ferrari to provide both drivers the best opportunity to succeed, letting the on-track performance decide who would receive any additional assistance when the time came. So there will be no one and two.

So far, so good, though Danilo's delivery seemed a little rehearsed. "As for Don's co-driver, we will let Manuel and Paolo settle that, through their results."

"Well, when are you going to decide?" a few reporters wondered, their interest level rising.

"We'll take this a race at a time, but we won't be rushed into a decision. It could be this weekend, it could be in Brasil."

"Don't you think that's unfair, leaving them hanging?"

"Our drivers know the terms of their contracts, or at least they should." Now I knew Zancana was repeating something. He reiterated, "we won't be rushed. Of course, they are

free to entertain other offers.”

Well. My new boss seemed to be telling his current drivers to go postal the last seven races, they’d take who was still sentient. A couple reporters looked at me with raised eyebrows, I raised both of mine back, and gave a tight-lipped smile in response.

I was surprised by Ferrari’s stance, but only because Ken would never do things that way. I suppose that was because for the longest time, he never had the luxury of two cars! Maybe Ken had spoiled us, but that was over. I was sure that both Manuel and Paolo could handle the pressure—and again, they were contracted and were going to get paid a shit ton.

Ken arrived at the track that afternoon. “How’d it go?” he inquired, getting out of his car. He’d taken the ferry across, enjoying the scenery.

“I don’t think I’m in Kansas anymore.” He looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled wryly.

He was looking more worn, like he’d seen a lot of shit in his day and it wasn’t interesting anymore. As I’d mentioned, he never was a nuts-and-bolts man, more of a networker. He wasn’t going to miss the sponsor chasing and politics, but he was going to regret not seeing the sponsors and politicians!

Other than the Ferrari situation, the press was only too willing to remind me of Germany. I knew all about it, I didn’t need to be pried apart and psychoanalyzed. The tenor of their questions was somewhat wearing, they seemed like they were the only ones who had noticed I’d finished out of the points in two of the last four races—fast tracks, ones at which I was ‘supposed’ to win. Out of thirty-six possible points to be gained in those races, I had only eighteen; that was batting .500. If it was baseball I would have been happy, I told them, but they wouldn’t buy it. I guess they noticed Jan’s thirty out of thirty-six, some residual insistence that Jan could drive my ass off. “Look,” I told them, “Out of sixty constructor points, Hazlett has gotten forty-eight. That’s eighty percent, and all I really care about. I ain’t about to back into this, don’t you worry.”

The figures hadn’t changed since I got out of my car in Germany, but had I been presented with them then, I would have probably punched some poor writer out. A trip back to Grace had occurred in the interim, not even the amateur actuaries could bother me appreciably after that.

But, the fact remained that I couldn’t screw up this weekend. Forget Houston, forget Silverstone; this was the pivotal race of the year. Everyone in our pit knew, not like we mentioned it. Anything besides nine points for me meant I would be driving looking over my shoulder for the rest of the year.

I informed Grace, and she understood, that I was going radio-silent as far as we were concerned until Sunday night. I didn’t want to give the press an excuse to doubt my focus.

Friday during practice it became apparent that Paolo and Manuel had no inkling of what went down between Ferrari and me. It showed on their faces, before practice, they were wandering around with “What have Ferrari gone and done now?” written on their faces. There were actually more press down at their end of the pits than at ours, Jan and I were looking for attention.

Jan did his part, spinning during practice, doing no damage but causing a huge grass

fire on the most remote part of the circuit. Practice was stopped while every fire truck in Francorchamps tore up the hill. Western Europe had been suffering from a dry summer, London not having seen rain in a month. At the circuit, it was thirty degrees Celsius at ten in the morning, we were all sweating our asses off. I didn't mind, even in triple-layer Nomex, it beat freezing from the hyperactive air conditioning in the hospitality suite.

Relief was on the way finally, in the form of a cold front that had passed through England that morning. Simon called the works and we all took turns listening to the rain pounding on the shop roof. Hopefully, I could sit on the balcony of my hotel that evening and watch lightning as I listened to Rush on my iPod.

But first, qualifying. When the track allows it, usually teammates will try to tow each other along the straights to go faster, like Jan and I did to sweep the last four front rows. The first sign that something was fucked in the Ferrari team was when Paolo broke the draft on Manuel during the first few minutes of timed practice. I was in the garage, sitting in the car, the bodywork off, talking to Brian about a bit of understeer. I was as relaxed as I could be in the cockpit, watching the FIA television monitor, when I saw Paolo make his move.

"Jesus, Brian, look at that shit!" I sputtered, popping my back as I sat up. Paolo had jinked so hard I thought he'd broken a half-shaft. There was no tactical reason for him to go to that part of the track, too bumpy, and off-line for the apex of the hairpin coming up next.

Brian looked over at me. "Maybe he missed a gear," he tried, although we both knew the truth. Jan came by, sat on my front tire as we followed the action on the screen. Next lap, Paolo appeared to play it straight, giving Manuel a good tow, but he braked a good hundred meters before the chicane, causing Manuel to lock up all four wheels. Manuel's tires were fucked, this attempt for a good q-time ruined. He made his way down the pit lane, the burnt-rubber smell following him, wafting into our garage.

My adjustments done, I was pushed out the door, into our pit space. Manuel effected the classic pouting driver rush through the pits, ignoring the reporters while still giving evidence of his disgust. Paolo stayed out, and while Jan waited for a wing change, I decided to try a little experiment.

I drove out at cruising speed, waiting for my tires to warm, looking for Paolo. Once he was up behind me, I accelerated. True to my suspicions, he let me tow him along, no attempt for a banzai pass, just tucked in tight as we both broke the lap record. I waved him past, he led me around with no brake tests, nothing.

Jan came out, I got more tires and joined him, assaulting the qualifying record. Paolo had pitted, Manuel still hadn't come back out. Coming to the close of that hour of qualifying, I had nipped Jan for the pole, we were a second in front of Paolo, but two ahead of Manuel. With his limited practice and probably still jittery and pissed after what had happened earlier, he had missed the best part of the session.

Ten minutes left before the end, Jan and I had decided independently that there was nothing left in the cars. So we were leaning on the pit wall, watching the clouds. Thunderheads built off to the north and west, an FIA wonk came around and announced that it would probably rain the rest of the weekend. Therefore it appeared that this might set the grid.

There was a rush of media down to the Ferrari pit, people shouting, crewmen sounding air horns warning bystanders that Manuel had decided to come out to play.

Turning to the monitors, we saw Manuel order the engine fired up while mechanics tightened his belts. There were seven minutes left in qualifying, time for just two laps. The temperature was still disgusting, there was a day's worth of rubber and oil on the track, and he had no one at all to run with.

Despite all that, his turbo whistled out of the pits, leaving dirt and trash swirling around his mechanics and the reporters. The sound of him crashing his gearbox through the woods trailed him, as the monitor followed his lap. He never showed opposite lock, no caressing the curbs, no wheelspin, and no locked wheels. Just taking one and a half seconds off his time, totally humiliating Paolo. He did the same time on his second lap, then coasted into the pits and got out again without talking.

The sun was finally behind the clouds. Jan pulled his sunglasses off, I'm sure my look of disbelief matched his.

"Pulled it out of his damned hat," I muttered.

"Haven't seen him do that in years," he agreed. Manuel made his point.

Manuel Rittmann was a veteran of over twenty years of racing automobiles of all types, getting his start in karts at age thirteen. Karts can be anything from weed-eater engines on wheels to sophisticated racing cars capable of 100 miles an hour. Most current Formula One drivers got their start in karts.

He became Argentine karting champion at seventeen, South American champ at eighteen. He then moved to England, winning the Formula Ford championship despite missing the first half-dozen races. Next year, it was Formula 3, and he won both the English and European series, as well as the Monaco Formula 3 race.

After another year of beating up on Formula 3, he got a test contract with Renault, learning circuits and developing cars. Loaned to Porsche for sports car races, he won Daytona and Le Mans, then got into F1 when Renault went to two cars.

He totally shamed his nominal team leader, winning the French Grand Prix and four others in his first year, finishing third in the points. By the end of his third year, he had won fifteen races, with two additional runner-up positions in the standings. Soon, became the highest-paid driver, also the most popular, idolized in both Europe and South America. He also had an attitude, based mostly on his perception that Renault wasn't doing all they could to win him a title. He had a point, in his three years with Renault, they had won a total of twenty-eight out of forty-eight races, but no titles, either the drivers or constructors.

He gave up on Renault, signing with Brabham-BMW, winning a further eight races, with another second and a fourth in the points. His second year, the four races he won were the only races he was around for the finish, which pissed him off to no end. Not only was the BMW engine a grenade, but he was crashing more that year than in his whole career up to then.

At the end of the year, he announced his retirement, planning to retire back to Argentina and run his ranch. Amazing what a call from Ferrari will do...like me, he had a love

of the Italian cars, to the point of coming back and taking a pay cut, besides.

He would have driven for free, and it showed in the intensity he put into his driving. Manuel won an additional seven races, pretty much controlling the points, except for the blip in the middle of the year when I won those three in a row. He clinched his first title at Monza, a quiet little ceremony in front of 200,000 crazed fans.

Over that winter, his asshole attitude out of the car mellowed, he suddenly appeared with a new bride, Valérie, a Monegasque girl usually photographed backstage at pop concerts. Marlena was born about a year ago.

Defending his title successfully, he turned back the attack of Hazlett-Ford. As I mentioned, I won six races to his three, but he had learned how to finish races, much to his surprise as well as everyone else's.

There was no talk of him retiring anymore, people began to wonder if he could break the record of five titles, having long ago passed the old record for race wins. Manuel admitted the possibility of going at least five more years. People discovered he had an opinion on subjects outside of racing, he became more gracious toward the others in the pits.

Coming into to Formula One, I was aware of his reputation and therefore shocked when he began to talk with me, I was in no position to question his generosity! He helped me a ton, honestly. He wasn't holding seminars on the Zen of racecraft, but he seemed to seek me out to impart whatever pearls of wisdom crossed his mind. Furthermore, he announced to the press that I had championship potential, but only after he'd quit!

Manuel seems to have taken the drubbing Hazlett-Ford is giving Ferrari this year in good spirits, voicing his admiration for our effort out of his car, and keeping his head down inside of it. No jealousy at all, this was just not Ferrari's year. They would be back, he said.

What Jan had alluded to was the sight of the Manuel of seeming aeons ago, shunning the press and his own team, nailing a perfect lap, then leaving again. Like he was trying to intimidate someone.

"Paolo and Manuel have always gotten along, they needed to in order to win last year," I shrugged toward Jan. Out of sixteen races last year, a Ferrari driver was on the podium in each of them, and in eight races both drivers finished in the top three. "I can't see why Manuel has a problem sharing his birthday cake all of a sudden."

"Can't you see?" Jan replied. "He's afraid of being put on a cake-free diet. He wants his Ferrari, he knows that someone will be out of a drive next year."

Simon: "First, consolidate his position; then, lobby or politick to convince Ferrari he should stay."

"If I felt the same way about Ferrari as he does, I'd do the same thing," Jan added. Hint, hint. I nodded, but man, this looked ugly.

Paolo Tambora was the youngest driver in Formula One in several years when he debuted for Ferrari at age twenty. Like Jan, he was a prodigy, disgustingly fast in anything he drove. He was tabbed as Manuel's number two last year, creating a sensation among the Formula One community. Not only for his age, but the fact that he was the first Italian to

drive for Ferrari in decades.

There were rude comments at the time about how he'd react to being anyone's number two, even someone like Manuel. However, he was a perfect teammate, finishing third in the points, keeping us from points we needed, deferring to Manuel in the races. He got a brilliant first win at Monaco, a wet to dry to wet race. Paolo judged the weather perfectly, not only in his car control, but his ability to time his pit stops.

Where the Italian racing fans loved Manuel like an old friend, they were infatuated with Paolo. The Tifosi, or Ferrari groupies, had a pleasant quandary: Who was better, Manuel, with his honed technique and love of Ferrari, or Paolo, with his kamikaze driving ability and love of the high life?

Manuel had calmed down with his accomplishments in life, to the point where you could approach him and not lose a limb. Conversely, Paolo had arrived with a used car salesman's attitude and had become progressively more glib. Paolo's picture was constantly in the tabloids; with some model at Cannes, a pop star in Tahiti, and the wife of an MP in London. He already had starred in a motion picture, an Italian musical comedy that Netflix wouldn't even touch. And also released a record, which sold a million copies in Italy, about a gross everywhere else. It was typical Eurodisco, in that talent just got in the way. With his producers, Ken could have sung it and made money! Paolo replied to that by saying "the best singer is the one who makes the most money," sort of like in racing, as a matter of fact. There had been the odd driver with an earring, but he had two, and was the first man in the paddock to show up with sleeve tattoos!

Despite their quirks and differences, Paolo and Manuel made a virtually seamless team, as formidable as Jan and I. Again, it had come down to the best car, that's where Ferrari had fallen down this year.

The last three big technological advances in Formula One had been ground effects, turbocharging and engine management. These three areas had been introduced by Lotus, Renault, and Porsche, respectively. Where Ferrari came in to this picture was after the first showing, when they could bring their resources to develop the technology one step further. Ferrari won the championships the first year after each of these steps forward.

After the British teams, or their engine suppliers, got their thumbs out of their butts and made the technology bulletproof, repeatable and fast, Ferrari would fall behind. I was banking on their long experience in V-12 engines to make the most of the new regulations for next year, and worry later about the competition catching up. Even if Manuel and Paolo felt differently about Ferrari than they did, they would still be fools for wanting to leave. Therefore, their behavior seemed understandable, if not rational.

So much for 'radio silence'. "Why don't they run three cars?" Grace wondered when I called Saturday night. I had brought the phone out to the veranda, to smell the rain.

In the inbred world of Formula One, that was a naive question, but using logic, she made a valid point. "I mean, Penske runs four at Indy, and they seem to do all right. You would think Ferrari would jump at the chance to get all three of you together, all the sponsors and attention."

I agreed with her: "In the early Seventies, Ferrari regularly ran three cars, they weren't the only ones. If the championship was decided early enough, most everyone would bring three cars over to Canada and Watkins Glen and try out the latest flavor-of-the-week driver.

"Hell, go even further back, in South Africa, there were damn near forty cars on raceday and customer Lotuses and McLarens filled half the grid. And before the war, the only two cars worth having were Mercedes and Auto Union, four cars each. Funny, those were considered the golden years of racing, no one complained about too many of the same marque of car.

"Some moron in the FIA, actually this wasn't Lacroix, decided that too many of the same type of car was bad for the sport, so they legislated a two-car minimum *and* maximum for each chassis. Now, half the grid falls out within twenty laps, there are rich boys with learner's permits buying rides, and Formula One is better off? Ferrari's management would be accused of heretical thought if they petitioned for three cars. I'm just a stupid driver, but I can't see a downside to that."

Lightning showed more clouds streaming in from the west as the front stalled. Spa in the rain was a character builder, but I was ready.

"Are Paolo and Manuel pissed?"

"At me? Not yet, at least." I told her about qualifying with Paolo on Friday. "And today, Manuel and I ran together for about ten laps trying Michelin's new rain tire.

"I'm sure they know I'm not the bad guy in all of this, but still--" I hoped I could communicate my frustration.

"They both seem over-proud. What do you think will come of it?"

"I don't know," I sighed, as the storm rumbled.

Friday, the rain was a blessing. Saturday, a novelty, but on Sunday it was a pain in the butt. At best, a drizzle, but interspersed with downpours with no warning. The touring car support race was red-flagged after a twelve-car wreck, our warmup was canceled because of a river crossing the track.

Noon, an hour from the purported start, and you could literally count the people in the stands. All the public-address systems had shorted out, so the normal drone of information heard before the race was missing, making the forest seem even more peaceful. I wondered about the television coverage, considering we'd probably finish close to dusk.

Assuming we'd start at all. I stole the Porsche safety car, cruising at a leisurely fifty miles an hour to the area of the track with the freshet crossing it. The door-ajar bell sounded as I opened the door, a counterpoint to the rumble of the motor.

The soles of my shoes squeaked on the asphalt as I surveyed the situation. Pebbles the size of my thumbnail rolled along with the flow. I looked upstream, and noticed that they used to be part of the pavement, the flood had eroded about eighteen inches of the track width. On top of that, the guardrail had been undermined.

I heard another car pull up as I toed the silt on the bank of the stream. Manuel got out of a Lancia sedan, came silently to my side. No officials, no reporters, just two guys discussing a washout on a secondary highway. Instinctively, I looked to the west to check the weather, though the weather was backing up, moving from the east. No matter, the sky was a

monochrome gray in each direction.

“Rain is one thing,” Manuel pointed out, “but...” It was so dank and humid that I felt I would drown if I took a deep breath. We continued around the circuit, perversely enough it was dry and above the clouds at the top of the course, like looking out of an airplane.

Back in the pits, I told the team and any race officials I could find of what we’d seen. Jan, Paolo, some of the other drivers, and the press slowly drifted over to us. “Now, I’ve got nothing against racing in a shower,” I started. “But the surface goes from damp to standing water two inches deep like this.” I held my fingers apart for emphasis. “A little consistency would be nice.” I told them about the erosion we had come across. “If you eat guardrail there, you’re fucking toast! I’m just waiting for a goddamn landslide to either bury the track or cart it away.”

Lacroix had come from his refuge, to my amazement, he was actually willing to listen to me.

“Gus, the last thing you need as the head of the governing body is to have someone cut his head off when he hits that excuse of a guardrail. Those gravel runoffs are like swimming pools, I could break my neck decelerating through one.

“On top of that, I could barely see Manuel in front of me, that was at fifty. If we bang wheels, there’s no telling where we could wind up.”

Jan had heard enough: “Don sounds scared, if that’s the case, then so am I. J-P, I’m this close to splitting for Majorca.”

While it seemed for the moment that sanity would rule, I also noticed that Brian and Marcel were still directing the preparation of our cars. Cynical sons of guns, I thought.

J-P was a politician if nothing else: “Men, you tell me,” he replied to Jan. “If there is anything close to a consensus, I’ll back you. But, if there is no clear decision, we will all have to live up to our obligations.” Meaning, of course, a billion television sets, a handful of masochists in the stands, and my girlfriend in her living room wanted to see us race, if we could see our way clear.

I turned toward Paolo and Manuel. If we all put up a front, the others would follow.

“Hot chocolate, guys, I’m buying,” I told them. Jan agreed immediately, Manuel nodded. We turned toward Paolo, I couldn’t believe it was taking this long.

“I can drive in anything short of a blizzard,” he sneered in Manuel’s direction. Paolo had found a weakness in Manuel’s makeup, he couldn’t be blamed for exploiting it, although his choice of a battleground led something to be desired.

“You fucking kid,” Jan said to Paolo. “How do you stuff your balls in the cockpit?”

Paolo was changing from an ignorant, talented kid into a calculating bastard in front of our eyes. Manuel knew he was being led through hoops, but his own pride and the eyes of Ferrari on him made him powerless to resist. I knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth—

“Jean-Patrick, get them to plane off the mud, put some tires around that guardrail. We’ll see what happens,” he whistled past the graveyard.

“Yeah, right,” Jan spat, but he zipped his suit up and reached for his helmet.

What in the fuck is wrong with me, I thought, doing the same. No practice, the car

hasn't run since yesterday afternoon, half the drivers haven't even raced in the rain. Still, if someone had to drive Ken's cars, I would want it to be the two of us.

A twenty-four-car grid became twenty-one when two cars got wet electricals and one spun off. That meant three cars in precarious positions on the track, but I wasn't surprised when no effort was made to delay the start. We were over three hours late starting, television was getting impatient, you understand.

I crawled to my pole position, in my mirror I saw that Jan's spot had a large puddle where his rear wheels belonged. I could see him shake his head in disgust. Thank God I'm up front, I thought, maybe they'll call the race before I had to lap anyone!

The last car stopped, the red light came on to put us under starter's orders, then the sky opened up again. Part of me wanted to cry, but the greater part got calm and focused, then the light went green.

I had already decided to leave in second gear, I didn't want to spin in front of the field. Paolo didn't share my concerns, jumping the start slightly and trying to get between me and the pit wall. Manuel had a hair up his ass as well, slotting between Jan and me at the start and making it three-wide going into the La Source hairpin. No future in this, I decided, backing out and seeing Jan slide past on the outside, almost by accident. He was mostly out of control, using up the curb and some of the runoff before he gathered it together.

So, I was in fourth, eating spray, but at least I was better off than five or so others, parts of cars littering the section of the track between the pits and the first corner. Manuel and Paolo went the better part of that first lap side by side, both of them getting squirrely where the stream crossed the track.

I had to apply opposite lock in both ends of the Bus Stop chicane. The deluge, incredibly, had failed to wash off the accumulation of diesel fuel and engine oil from the traffic that used the road during the rest of the year. I could see the rainbow sheen on the road.

Paolo had made a run at Manuel, getting by at La Source but losing it back when he nudged the guardrail on the exit. I saw it on NBC later, it was a classic suck-in. Manuel left him just enough room on the inside of the hairpin for Paolo to bite, then Manuel out-accelerated him on the exit. Paolo got on the gas too quick, overreacted, and went to the barrier. He used every bit of skill to first avoid hitting hard enough to cause damage, and then to slither back onto the track.

The difference between fourth and third was apparently significant enough for Jan to wave me past. Upon spotting Paolo getting going again, three points became six like that, although Paolo had checked his car and was coming back up to us. I waved to Jan, as the radio had shorted out, and then tried to find Manuel in the spray.

Can I do anything with him? I took a deep breath, trying to read the pit boards. If this race had been dry, I would be ahead by ten seconds now. As it was, the rain had made the difference between Hazlett's aerodynamics and Ferrari's negligible.

I smiled despite the conditions. All right, now it's down to the drivers. I was sure Manuel knew what was coming, and felt the same.

When I was growing up, reading about the classic races, there were still hosts of ball-

busting circuits left. The Nordschleife circuit of the Nurburgring, Spa, Monza, Osterreiring. There was an assumption made back then that if you wanted to race, you ought to be able to figure out that there were certain dangers inherent in that endeavor. Racing your Auto Union was slightly more dangerous than sitting on the front porch watching corn grow, for example.

There were honorable people, in and out of the cockpit, who worked hard to avoid stupid, unnecessary dangers, but still keeping within the framework of the existing tracks.

Then, in the Sixties, as more money came into the sport, the greater the cry to guarantee the sponsors a return on their investment in the driving talent. Sure, losing a driver was always bad for business, but my view was that they should make the cars stronger, not change the tracks.

Instead, we got antiseptic circuits like Hockenheim, Dijon, most of Ricard. Wide, flat turns, no crowned roads or off-camber corners. Houston, Long Beach; no elevation changes, ninety-degree turns. One after the other.

Then the politicians sunk their teeth into the remaining good tracks, closing the Nurburgring for the most part, truncating Spa, putting fucking chicanes everywhere else. Monza and the Osterreiring used to be tracks that made grown men weep when they got it right, now they're emasculated, with only the occasional reminder of what racing used to be.

How the Nazis ever let Eau Rouge-Raidillon at Spa slip through their vetting is beyond me, though I don't wonder aloud. This is a corner that will put your tail between your legs if you fuck up, or increase your market value if you get it right.

It doesn't look like much viewed in plan, indeed it appears to be a poor excuse for a chicane. But driving it is another thing. You've been accelerating ever since La Source, diving downhill, past the old pits until you hit a creek bottom. Turn left quickly—this is Eau Rouge—as the car bottoms out. Raidillon follows immediately—the road bends right, climbing uphill rapidly, the car gets light as it drifts out to the guardrail. By the way, you can't see the apex at Raidillon...You're shifting at both the bottom-out and also when the suspension unloads. If you miss that second shift while you're drifting, you won't be able to accelerate and keep traction, your car will slide into the rail; by the way, you're doing 150.

I can't leave this point alone; the only way to go through the corner is to keep accelerating—if you don't, you won't have the downforce you need and the car will swap ends. That is so foreign to anyone out in the real world, as it was to me when I first heard about it. I became convinced in a hurry when I turned a F3000 car into a thousand souvenirs by not making the commitment to keep my foot down. I lifted for a second, the car wobbled, I couldn't push it through by then, the car backed into the guardrail.

And that was when it was dry!

So what, that was a long time ago. I was able to rationalize a plan to get to Manuel despite the conditions. Wet or dry, my car would work in the fast corners better than his, and Raidillon was certainly the fastest. Manuel was having to saw at the wheel at least twice through the corner, even at 'reduced' speed. It wasn't giving me trouble, figuratively speaking.

For about ten laps, I closed the gap to Manuel, my eyes wide open and micro-managing the wheel. Manuel began to push it, too, but his car just didn't understand. The line he had

to take through one corner put him through a puddle while the car was still drifting, causing him to half-spin, now I was on his rear wing.

I tried the same pass Paolo attempted, except when Manuel booted it on the exit, I looked straight ahead, drag-racing Manuel down the hill to Eau Rouge. If I got any bit ahead of him, he would be smart enough to back off so he could negotiate the bend.

Here we go; second, third, fourth...I might have been a nose ahead, maybe not, but I couldn't see him. Here's the left, good! I saw a swipe of red in my peripheral vision. Hot damn, now let's concentrate on the uphill right. Hit fifth, the car drifted, but that's okay...

Then dead silence, as my engine quit. The car continued its slide, though nothing was going to bring it back. Damn, I was in front, too, I thought. I tried opposite lock, but I was fucked. Three-tenths of a second later, the engine stirred again, but by now it was no consolation, I'd hit the rail side-on rather than back into it. With the rain-slick grass, I wouldn't look any better in the hospital.

Gravel banged off the undertray, my ankle took a knock off the side of the footwell. My last thought was going to be how much my foot hurt...

I do have faith, although I don't have an abiding belief in any organized God or anything, but I had no explanation for the way the car stopped sliding *at* the barrier. The worst thing that happened was my radiators were stuffed full of grass. I found first as the spray settled. Manuel was sure he was going to get caught up in my wreck, so he slowed as much as he could. As a result, he was able to watch me pick myself out of the grass. Brilliant piece of driving, I thought sarcastically.

Sooo, water apparently had gotten into the electronics, interrupting the commands to the engine. I couldn't really fault the car or the preparation, hell, it was a monsoon out. What worried me was if it was going to do it again, and where.

Another problem; Manuel had seen my best move, he should be watching for it. Or maybe not, I had almost killed myself, maybe he felt I would pussyfoot it until my heart slowed to normal. What he didn't know was that my car worked great, I didn't fuck up the corner, why shouldn't I try again? As for the engine, well...

He took the same line as before, but I was on the gas out of the hairpin sooner than previously. I swung out to the curb, carrying my speed and coming up on Manuel, my tire on the rumble-strips, a kick in the rear from the engine would be nice—

And it kept going! The usual whistle from the turbo behind my head, just like on the dyno. I inched ahead of Manuel through the forest. Fuck you, I said to the forces conspiring to ruin my day.

Man, that felt good. No one else could have made that move, and I did it twice. And, the engine bog didn't cause me to lose concentration. Much.

However, the rain was still falling, the track hadn't gotten any simpler, and it was hard to tell if Manuel had anything left—I knew I was out of tricks.

One lap after I got Manuel, the engine cut out again. I was on a straight when it occurred, and still going straight when it came back, all it did was cause my hairline to recede a little further. I had now established it was a random occurrence, no more likely to show up at Raidillon again.

Coming around one corner, without any flags or other warning, I was confronted by Jan's car in the middle of the road. Rather, the driver's compartment, the engine steaming on the grass. There wasn't time to panic or react, good thing—my car drifted past by inches.

I checked my mirror, noting that Manuel had made it past, then I saw Paolo's Ferrari on the grass about half a mile further on. Wonder if they got together, I thought dryly, as the engine quit yet again. Beyond caring by now, I was just praying for the finish.

Manuel dropped back, apparently he was happy to finish second as long as Paolo was out. One more lap, still no sign of yellow flags at Jan's wreck or any attempt being made to remove the debris. Past the pits...and there's the damned checker! Oh, well. The motor quit again and I said to hell with it, I drove onto the grass near a marshal's stand.

A corner worker pulled up, slapped me on the helmet and helped me out of the car. He motioned me onto his Kawasaki, and we went back to the pits. Come close to disaster in the car, now I'll get whacked on a motorcycle. Didn't seem too much of a stretch.

I was met in the pits by Jan, who had hoofed it from the crash site. "Hell, Jan, what happened?" I asked, as the crew gathered around.

"Fucking Paolo driving with his dick again." He tested his shoulder, grimaced. "Didn't I tell you this would happen? He never made a move to pass, just wham! Right up my ass."

"What'd he say?"

"I haven't found him, yet," he confessed. "Gimme a minute, though."

But first, he looked down to the Ferrari end of the pits. "Those guys are fucked, big time. Did you see their pit boards?"

"No, that was the last thing on my mind, I hardly had time to look at my own."

"Well, J-P decided it was getting too dark, he announced after the start that the race was only going to run for forty-five laps."

I looked up to the stratus. Funny, it wasn't any darker than it was five hours ago.

"Our friend Lacroix didn't bother telling Simon about it, I found out from Paolo's board. That's why he went nuclear and punted me, I surmise. The hell of it was, Ferrari didn't even let Manuel know!"

"Bullshit," I exclaimed, though not accusing Jan of lying at all.

"True. When Paolo's board said 'L5', Manuel's had 'L15' on it." (The race was originally set to run fifty-five laps.) "They were hoping Paolo would get up to Manuel in the worst way."

"Yeah, and if they whacked either of us, well, that's racing."

Once Jan got jobbed by Paolo, it meant that they were both eliminated from the drivers' title chase. That would be reason enough for Zancana to beat the shit of Paolo for wrecking his own car, let alone anyone else's.

A reporter had the points update, but Jan waved him away. He had the look of a man who had other things to worry about, like his arm.

I made it to the podium first, the applause and cheers damped by the rain. Below me, I saw Ken and Simon in some FIA guy's face, casually inquiring about the communications network and why the news was different from one end of the pits to the other. Over here, Manuel had his finger in Zancana's chest, he had seen the pit boards after all. But heading off toward the motorhomes, Jan had his arm on Paolo's shoulder as they told each other their

side of the story, apparently amicably. One big happy family.

Manuel climbed the steps, clinching me and doing the two-cheek kiss, which I wasn't as enthusiastic toward as I am usually. If he had put his foot down in the garage, we might have avoided all this shit, but this wasn't the place to call him out. So, I put on a happy face and together we drowned Lacroix in Moët.

I felt unclean about my participation, this was no day to go racing. Yeah, but I had gotten my nine, the proof's in the pudding, I suppose.

Christ, what a long day. I showered in the motorhome, and fell asleep on the jet. Simon drove Jan and me to the works, I discussed things with Simon before I left.

"So, what'd you think?"

In a considered tone, "we were all extremely lucky today."

"You're blaming us brats, then?"

"Why, are you? Don, I've rarely been as scared. But, I was reminded anew as to how thirty some-odd million seems cheap for someone who can do what you did." A compliment, I guessed?

Jan's Mustang idled at the far end of the lot, fog arose from the exhaust as the catalytic converter warmed up. "Simon, it wasn't us, it was the Ferrari guys—"

"It was Paolo. That bleeding diva won't see the end of the season. What's the line out of that Jo-El Sonnier song? 'Writing checks his body can't cash'?"

"And Manuel's right there with him," I replied, wondering how Simon knew about Jo-El Sonnier...

Jan rumbled out of the parking lot, giving a wave. Simon turned to me: "Don, those two have a problem. It follows that Ferrari have, as well. But they're nothing compared to yours. Everything was peaceful over there until you signed."

"What was I to do?"

"Oh, I'm, not blaming you, Don," he laid a hand on my arm. "Moon phases. I said, it's your problem, not your fault."

"Well hell, they're grown men."

"It says here." He laughed and shifted in his seat, I took that as a cue to head out.

I took the long way home. So many things were on my mind, from Lacroix deliberately leaving us out of the loop on the race distance, to the power struggle within Ferrari. Add to that Jan's injury and the way my ankle was throbbing, and I was ready for an asylum.

There are a lot of ways to use psychology on other drivers. About three-quarters through my F3000 season, the press started to notice that I was making the best starts of anyone on the grid. My car allowed me to qualify tenth or so, but three times out of four I'd be in the points by the first corner. (The fourth time, of course, I'd be punted into the gravel!)

"Well, I've got a special technique," I told the writers. Since there were generally a few rent-a-drivers within earshot in the F3000 paddock, this line of bullshit was for their benefit as well. "Everyone else takes off when the light flashes green, right?"

"Well, of course, hillbilly," they replied, (paraphrasing slightly.)

"That's it," I whispered conspiratorially. "I'm gone when the *red goes off*."

I was met with chuckles and condescending expressions when I said that. That was okay, though, because every set of start-lights had some delay between the red and green. I knew this because I took the time to look. It might be two-thousandths, maybe one-hundredth, but it was there nonetheless, and ready to be exploited.

None of the other drivers laughed, though, I could sense their wheels turning.

Sure as shit, at the start of that weekend's race, two guys in front of me jumped the start in anticipation of the green, while the driver next to me stalled his engine when he tried to stop *his* jump. By the time all the penalties were sorted out, I was on the podium, third place with a satisfied smile on my face.

Of course, mindfucking a field full of daddy's-money types is one thing, but most of the Formula One drivers had read that book and seen that movie by the time I arrived. Assuming equal fields, I'd be able to get eighteen or so F3000 drivers rattled, compared to only six in Formula One. And those six would have qualified behind me in any case. Meaning, I couldn't bluff my way to the front.

But that doesn't mean you stop trying to find an edge. Likewise, you should be aware when someone is trying to climb in your ass. Admit it, then counteract it. If you want to call that ability to recognize threats maturity, fine. I reckon that if you use that yardstick then Jan is a year or so less mature than me. Someone rides his rear wing, he starts to overdrive, burning his tires and riching out his fuel. Whereas I figure the guy is behind me for a reason, even if his car began working better than mine, he's still got to get past me.

But to make my point clear: Psychology is one thing, brake tests are another.

"I don't want to sound vain, Don," Grace told me, "but you looked like you needed me."

I had watched the tape of NBC's coverage Tuesday morning, while waiting for a decent hour in Atlanta. Her call came just as I was heading for the phone, my heart jumped as I heard her voice. She had watched the race, too, TV was right on top of both the pit boards and the reduced distance.

"I saw your deal up at Raidillon, I just about shit. The guys on television said that was the best job of driving that they'd seen you do," she reported. I was glad I'd kept them entertained..."They figured you made up for Hockenheim. Almost."

"Well, nobody has seen the best drive I've had, I doubt anyone ever will. It was the day I drove Marie to Marshall to have Theresa."

"Aww," she said approvingly. "Why was it so difficult?"

"It was no big deal, weather was fine, we had a lot of time. But I purposely placed a lot of pressure on myself, I wanted to be the one to get the job done, I wanted to be responsible.

"It's not like racing, where I put the pressure on, if I fuck up, I'm out of the race. With Marie, if I fucked up, that was my sister, not Paul and Stephen on TV talking about it."

"Where was John?"

"He had one delivery every three days to Lamoni, Iowa. The only drop outside of the immediate area. Marie wasn't due for two weeks, so John booked, Marie wasn't too worried. So of course, that's when her water broke, and that's when the call came down the stairs. Everyone was looking to me, and I did it. Then I was an uncle!

“But yesterday, that was nothing brilliant. I just avoided getting killed, that’s all. I feel somewhat of a hypocrite, I had put my foot down, I wasn’t going to go.”

“Once Manuel said yes, there went your solidarity.”

“Yeah. He reacted, he didn’t lead. Let Paolo dictate terms.”

“An impartial observer would say you did the same thing as Manuel.”

“But when I decided to get in the car, I was able to detach my emotions and do the job. No one can tell me Manuel did that, his focus was on playing roulette with Paolo.”

“Ken wouldn’t have kicked your ass if you had decided to bail, and you didn’t get in at gunpoint either. I know some part of you wanted to see what you could do, maybe you were even glad to race.”

“You’re right,” I thought out loud. “That’s it. I want to think I can drive better than the next guy. Can read the track better, anticipate the weather better. I’m glad I was the one in that position, glad that it was my responsibility. I suppose I’m arrogant, slightly. I have to be.”

I laughed. “Hell, Grace, I ran out of secrets. You own me now.”

“Well, no shit.” She got quiet after that—was that too much of a burden?

“What should I do with you?” she wondered after a while.

“In a perfect world?” I asked. “We’d be having sex on stacks of twenty-dollar bills and making lots of babies. But this isn’t perfect. I can’t let you in totally yet, you haven’t seen me with a major problem.

“But someday, there will be a situation I can’t buy my way out of, one I can’t use my driving skills on, and I’m scared to death of you having to watch me fail.”

“So, you want to spare me this pain of yours?” she rolled that around for a second.

“Really paternalistic of you, I’m amazed at the lack of faith you have in me to deal with it.”

“Grace, I just can’t do something like this impulsively. I can’t assume anything about you, or let someone besides me do the worrying. I think I’m supposed to do protect you, but I’m only pissing you off. I’m sorry.”

“I know you’re trying, and I love you for it. But neither of us can erase nor ignore what we’ve learned already. This genie won’t go back in her bottle. If something happens to you, at any time in the rest of your life, it’s going to happen to me as well. I want that responsibility, too.”

I couldn’t believe that she really knew where this was going. “Honey, last thing I’m going to do is ditch you because you think too much,” she said quietly, but firmly. “But understand that I’m also thinking—hard. I’m working. I’m trying. You’re worth it.”

“Thank you. I am honored. And I love you, too.” Maybe it just *seemed* that we’re stuck in place. But it was a nice place to be, for all of that.

Spain:

The team left for Jerez a day early, Michelin asking us to test some new compounds. I

could have begged off, let some Formula 3000 newbies do it but since I like to drive I jumped at the chance to help out.

It was a good idea, but for the intermittent showers that began almost as soon as the transporters arrived. This doesn't happen; it never rains in Spain this time of year, not even on the plain. Michelin's rain tires were still in their second transporter, the one just getting off the ferry at Calais!

Therefore, Jan and I puttered around the paddock on Thursday. The highlight of the morning for the two of us was officiating a soccer game on the front straight between journalists and the Hazlett mechanics. Later on, we met Bill Moore from Ford for lunch.

This was my first opportunity to talk with him since my move to Ferrari, and I wanted him to know there were no hard feelings. I needn't have bothered, he was delighted in my choice while looking forward to "kicking my ass" next year.

He was slightly amused that I'd taken leaving Ford so hard, being used to drivers changing teams and teams switching engines. Bill was grateful for what Ken and I had done with Ford, but it had to end sometime.

Jan being more a mercenary, highest-bidder type of racer—and now having the resume to back it up—Bill had an easier time understanding him. Francis still hadn't announced his engines, Jan professed ignorance at the goings-on, as did Moore.

In my opinion, I still felt that there was some chance that Ford would stay on, given Francis' propensity to buy people off. I announced that to the table, which caused both men to laugh. Bill because of the absurdity of the statement, Jan since it contained a thread of cynical logic!

Lunch arrived, we changed the subject to Lacroix's engine regulations. "Ol' Jean-Patrick is fucked if he thinks that a three-five is going to make the field more competitive or it'll be better economically," Bill said. "You know Ferrari are ready, they probably told Lacroix when they'd like to see the regulations kick in! I know we were napping a bit, Porsche said later days, they're leaving McLaren up on blocks. Renault may or may not be ready, I doubt they know. Honda won't even tell the FIA what they're doing."

I had read the papers, the news was filled with stories pulled almost verbatim from hastily written press releases describing new engines from think tanks I'd never heard of. Around Ken's, such reports were dismissed with derision most of the time, but I could sense that team owners were taking them a little more seriously lately.

A lot of these outfits were run by people with enthusiasm, few of them by ones with common sense, however. I wished these people good luck, maybe some year they'd get it right.

Then there were either old- or new-money types who got a hair up their asses and decided they wanted to be in the paddock. You usually found these guys at Monaco, offering money to technical people like it was going out of style, leasing fancy shops and the latest equipment, making a big splash at trade shows and in the media. With this lot, you might find yourself locked out of the office one Monday, similar to my experience with Nicholson.

I hadn't made it a point to keep tabs on Francis' whereabouts, but the Sun mentioned that he'd been spotted working on his tan in Ocho Rios. Not too many Jamaican engine

manufacturers, I thought, but it really wasn't my problem.

"So anyhow," Bill continued, "there are going to be a lot of chassis lying around waiting for engines, and most of the ones on the grid will probably blow up within ten laps. There'll probably only be six cars left at the end of the races next year, and two of them will be Ferraris!" He looked at me, winked.

I ignored that and instead asked Bill if he could tell me how Ford was doing on their three-fives. Officially, I was the competition for next year, so I was looking for gossip, not secrets or anything. Bill's answer surprised me.

"Hell, Don, that's what happens when you don't show up at the shop occasionally. I've got an engine being fitted in one of Ken's mules, I want you to test it here Monday for us." I looked startled, while Jan ate his meal with an inscrutable expression.

"I thought you were caught napping," I smirked.

"I'm a light sleeper, as it turns out," he laughed. "But," he qualified, "we're really behind in terms of development, that's why I want you." That meant a lot and I told him.

The Ferrari transporter crept into the paddock, hopefully meaning a fresh side for the football match. Bill couldn't be specific about the bells and whistles for the new engine, but we spent some more time discussing such 'theoretical' concepts as dual spark plugs, pneumatic valve actuation, and sodium ceramic coatings for the combustion chambers.

"Sounds expensive," Jan noted as I sipped my soda.

"No shit," Bill acknowledged. "But thanks to the benevolent leadership of the FIA, we're spared the skyrocketing costs of the turbos." He snorted derisively. "And we pass the savings on to you!"

The game broke up below us, everyone running over to the Ferrari truck. "Ahh, shit," Bill sighed. "I smell a rat, a Ferrari prancing rat."

We made our way through the crowd, as the Ferrari mechanics pushed a car into their garage. The light was going, another batch of showers moving in, but it was apparent that this Ferrari wasn't one from Belgium.

Though the front of the car looked the same, from the rollbar bar back, it had a just-finished, worry-about-it-later paint job. Different wax sheens, paint overspray. A ram-air box rose above the rollbar, that meant...a normally aspirated V-12! There was no way in hell that the mechanics would lift the engine cover, but to our professional viewpoints, there was no need. Ferrari had jumped the gun, rather, showed what next years' gun would look like...

I looked over to Bill, who had moved from us to Zancana, gesticulating with his hands as well as any Italian, as they discussed the engine.

"I'd pay cash money to hear it fire up," Bill mentioned to Danilo.

Zancana shrugged "Why not?" and motioned to the mechanics. A starter was inserted into one of the cars. A whirr, a puff of black smoke, then a loud roar cracked concrete and peeled paint off the walls.

The crowd roared, the V-12's were back, a welcome change from the strangled scream of the turbos. This was the sound Ferraris made back when I was a kid. Some men in the paddock knelt to the cars, a few others had tears in their eyes.

I hated to sound a defeatist tone, but we were in the fertilizer even before Ferrari brought the new engine. Since Houston, we had been on fast tracks, which allowed Sanjay's design to show its advantages over the other cars. But Ferrari had an equally large advantage on the slow ones, as we found out painfully enough at Monaco and Houston. Through luck, we managed to win Houston, but run that race ten times, Ferrari would have won at least eight. You talk with anyone not familiar with racing about 'fast' or 'slow' tracks and they tend to look at you funny. And, yeah, you'd have to be drunk to try to drive your minivan around Houston at eighty, much less take it around Silverstone at 160.

The dividing point between our relative performance was about 115 miles an hour for an average lap speed. Both Jerez and Hungary are below that, so for the first time in months, Jan and I would honestly be racing for points, not the win.

The new *muletta* was just for show, they didn't need a new engine to kick our ass. There was no reason other than to show me what I had waiting for me next year!

The difference between the Ferraris and us was pointed out dramatically the first five minutes of practice. I could understand the Ferraris pulling out a little through the slow corners, but at any fast track we always got by or extended our lead in the sweepers. Trouble was, there were no fast corners at Jerez, just nice, constant-radius ninety-degree bends, one after the other.

Okay, fine, I can deal with someone else eating my lunch occasionally. But the first time Paolo got away from me in a corner...well, hell. As I dove into the pits, I heard Jan comment over the radio, "I can't even stay in their fucking draft. Oh my God, this is going to be a long weekend!"

I wandered down to their garage during the break between practice and qualifying, and was cheerfully met with a plate of pasta by the mechanics. Paolo walked me around the car as we ate, he and the engineers showing me the new engine in detail.

Manuel arrived from his own lunch, Paolo coincidentally excused himself, remembering an interview he'd promised. I turned to lock eyes with someone, but I found that none of the others found that behavior noteworthy. I immediately thought of a pair of Betta fish, mildly amusing as long as there was a partition between them. But get them on the same track, and guess who in the middle?

For appearance's sake, I accompanied Manuel on another tour, I visualized the red-white-and-green trim around the new car, interrupted only by the daydream of "Don Peterson" in subdued but confident script below the cockpit and the American flag dry-transferred onto the body panels.

Danilio came down to our pits just before qualifying started. After a summer of having Hazlett-Fords in his nightmares, you could excuse him for gloating over his new weapon, but he took pains to avoid the subject.

Or any other one, actually. Mentioning obtusely that Paolo and Manuel were driving like in the old days (last year, for crying out loud), and at least the next new races would be exciting, even if the championship was all but out of reach.

"Yeah, this excitement I don't need," I smiled wryly, remembering how the Ferraris had gotten lost that morning.

Paolo and Manuel continued their non-cooperation in qualifying, circulating on opposite ends of the track at any given time. As far as their performance was concerned, it was still no problem, they were a half-second or so in front of us. Nothing we could do helped, Jan and I drafting each other on every measly straight, running twenty laps each to the Ferraris' four. The Longines printout at the end of the session confirmed the reversal; me third, Jan fifth after trying something on the front-end aerodynamics that didn't work.

Jan stomped out of our area, good-naturedly muttering something about getting to his hotel to find some companionship. I busied myself making a paper airplane out of the time sheet. I was dazed slightly by Ferrari's speed. But I didn't feel humbled, I was gracious enough during our own hot streak. I took a long view, understanding that this was the time to drive smart, not do anything stupid, just get the points.

I understood my error at Hockenheim, trying to drive under my ability and that of the car. When you have a package that allows you to go that good, that's what you do! But this weekend was the time to 'enjoy the scenery', that is, watch the Ferraris go past.

Fat chance. Ten minutes into Saturday qualifying, I was in the pits, yelling for an even softer tire than the qualifying rubber Michelin had recommended. I told Brian to give me more wing, so the car wouldn't wash out in the corners. Brian looked at me funny, we both knew that would make me slower down the straights, but I had run out of ideas. In front of me, Jan was getting Marcel to take wing out of his car, going the opposite way of me.

Simon remarked that meant we'd both be good at different points on the track, but not really any help to one another. Tactically, we were making a bad decision, but with the Ferraris barely broken in and handing our asses to us already, tactics didn't count for much.

With twenty minutes left, I was back in, my hands shaking, sweat in my eyes, pounding the sides of the cockpit with my fists as the monitor showed me a half-second behind Manuel, fifty-three hundredths behind Paolo. Jan had fallen to sixth, he got into trouble with his low-downforce and spent some time in the gravel. No damage done to either him or the car, and although he was game to try the spare, he changed his mind when he saw me unbuckle and get out.

"Break my balls and gain a few hundredths," I smiled, wiping my forehead. "It's time to get drunk," I told the assembled reporters and crew. I was taking this a little too seriously and I just couldn't stop. I had run thirty laps on Saturday, the crew had adjusted and reset and replaced and all I'd managed to do was scare myself at least half-a-dozen times.

I was talking with the guys from NBC, relating how I'd tried to pace myself, cruise through qualifying, and get a good race setup, and get out of Jerez with my sanity intact.

"So look. We beat the shit out of our cars. There's no way in hell we could have got to the Ferraris, so why did we try? I was out of control."

"You're a racer, Don," they chuckled. Like that made it okay?

"But you're a portrait of self-restraint compared to those two," Paul pointed out, and it didn't take a genius to figure out who. "Third might not be too bad of a place to be, with those two children pissing on each other's Wheaties."

They hadn't the chance to screw up each other's qualifying, because they'd gotten up to speed in such a short time. Paolo was on pole in six laps, Manuel second in ten. So

pronounced was their advantage, that they'd set their times at opposite ends of the session.

Paul was looking for some insight on how things had gotten so chilly at Ferrari, since their people only wanted to talk about the cars. "Fuck if I know," I snorted. "Off the record, I get a vibe that maybe I should change the subject, let the professional human resource specialists back at Maranello resolve it."

"What's wrong with this picture?" Paul's voice boomed on the open of NBC's coverage of the Grand Prix. The camera mounted on my rollbar had a great view of the back of Paolo's Ferrari, this was the first race since Houston when the front row wasn't full of Hazletts. The morning warmup with race settings saw Jan get up to fourth fastest, but we were a full second behind the Ferraris.

I had determined that there was about a one-percent chance that Manuel and Paolo would take each other out in the first corner. To that end, I was hoping to be as far away from them as possible to leave myself room for avoiding action.

Guessing correctly on my reaction to the green light, I really nailed the fucker, swooping to the outside to be on Manuel's left heading to the first right-hander. Manuel and Paolo were in a dead heat, Manuel starting to squeeze Paolo toward the inside curb.

I had come across a brilliant rationalization that morning: If my car loves fast corners, why not treat the slow turns like fast ones? I kept my foot in it, letting the car drift way out to the left-hand curb, two wheels on the grass. The car held, now I was alongside Manuel, taking the pavement he'd been expecting to use. He had to cut back, keeping Paolo on the right side, that permitted me to keep my momentum and finish the lap in the lead! Paul and Stephen in the booth stuffed their eyeballs back into their sockets, Paul losing all his professional decorum as he whooped over my 'brilliant' start.

Sure, it felt good, but then the Ferraris got their shit together and drafted past me going into the first turn. Oh well, enough showing off, I decided. Just try to keep them honest, stay within mirror-range.

Paolo was just visible, at least on the pit straight, but Manuel was long gone. I thought maybe Paolo had damaged his undertray going on the curb on the first lap, but every time I closed on him he was able to pull out again.

Since Manuel had checked out, my speculation about the two of them wrecking seemed more remote by the second. Jan was up to fourth, but wasn't close enough to me to warrant waving him past to have a crack.

Ten laps left, I had run out of ideas, Ferrari had sent pit signals to take it easy, Manuel had slowed. TV showed that Paolo had no intention of doing the same, a puff of black smoke from his tailpipes indicating that he'd turned his fuel mixture to full rich. While Manuel took it easy, picking his spots when lapping cars, Paolo was soon up on him. This time, it wasn't a case of *team* duplicity, Paolo simply ignored his board. Manuel was still unaware of what was going on, although Paul and Stephen wondered why Ferrari didn't radio him...

It appeared from the tape that Manuel finally spotted Paolo, got him to attempt to pass on the outside of a corner, then watched Paolo drift out on his old tires into the dirt. Manuel cut behind him and regained the lead. Next lap, Paolo tried again, again Manuel took

a wide line. Third time, Paolo tried the inside, Manuel turned in early, forcing Paolo to lock his brakes.

On the penultimate lap, Paolo swung to the inside coming down the pit straight, almost hitting the Armco and scattering team members holding out pit boards. Dust and marbles flew, Paolo got one millimeter in front of Manuel, then turned hard left. Manuel almost didn't see him, then jerked left about two feet. Paolo then repeated the move, Manuel moved about one foot, daring Paolo to do it again. But by now, they were at the turn-in to the corner, Manuel had no choice but to lift. For the rest of the lap, Paolo drove his car like a sprinter, making his car wide enough so Manuel couldn't get a run at him.

So that's how it ended, Paolo and Manuel nose-to-tail, I was about forty-five seconds behind, Jan was almost lapped. Ferrari had broken our six-race win streak; although their crews were happy, Zancana looked a little relieved the race was over.

Up on the podium, while Paolo and Manuel both shared conversation with me and the race officials, they didn't say a word to each other. Until I saw the tape, I didn't know exactly what happened, but it didn't take an empath to figure out someone had crossed the other.

Their battle next moved to the public prints, on Monday Manuel branded Paolo a 'Judas'. He also said that while he was trying to get the maximum points for the team, Paolo was only looking out for himself. On the surface, he had a point, but I knew I wasn't going to hear the whole story in the papers.

On Tuesday, Paolo fired back, not mentioning Manuel by name, but telling the magazine reporter that "I was down fifty horsepower to the other car," and his win was a result of his ability behind the wheel. I thought Zancana would belt him for that—no driver *ever* carries a Ferrari. Not surprisingly, Ferrari issued their own statement, reminding whomever that 'our intent is to provide both drivers with equipment as equal as possible,' yaddayadda.

Wednesday, Manuel commented to Paolo's claims of driving ability, he had no doubt that Paolo conceivably could carry an inferior car, but he didn't have one in Spain. Manuel reminded Paolo that he taught Paolo everything he knew about driving a Formula One car, and he'd be willing to give Paolo another lesson Sunday next at the Hungaroring?

"Jesus," I remarked to Jan. "This is better than soap operas!"

"Yeah, except you're going to drive for that over-macho, too-Latin bunch of 'sportsmen' next year," he snickered.

Grace was in a good mood, having just returned from Los Angeles, where she'd opened up her first west coast studio. *Cosmopolitan's* bureau in L.A. had nosed into the operation, CNBC had shot some video.

She had mentioned the name of the mall in passing, it took me a minute to place the name. Sad to say, the shopping center was on the site of the old Riverside Raceway. Never drove there, but the track was a shrine to followers of post-war U.S. road racing.

"Honestly, I couldn't tell there had been a track there," she reported. "Though there were a lot of big trees landscaping the area, those cost a shitload of money to transplant."

The land rapists had gotten Ascot and Ontario lately, as well. Replaced for the most part by claustrophobic street circuits and bleak road courses like Jerez.

"Don, you're just pissed off," she chided. "If that were your car kicking ass, then you'd wish all the tracks were like Jerez."

She was probably right. "So, what did you think of L.A.," I changed the subject.

"Too damned busy to sightsee," she replied. "I wanted to get out to Gazzarri's or the Whisky, see next year's metal bands, but pesky people kept throwing money at me.

"But I know that bloody mall inside and out. I finally got sick of mallfood, the first thing I did when I got back to Atlanta was go by Mom's for some home cooking.

"I looked over a few other locations while I was out there. Every one of those malls had 'Centre' or 'Pointe' in their name. What's the point? All the kids call them 'the mall', anyhow."

I was still thinking about Riverside, imagining me in the parking lot of that mall and wondering if the landscape had changed too much for me to spot landmarks. Did they leave any clues, even something trivial like 'Winner's Circle', or was the mall just located on 'Frontage Road'?

"I got home, and it was a little funny, not finding you on the couch or doing the laundry." She sounded sad. "The house is empty. I go to bed because I'm bored, then I stay up tossing until one since I'm still bored. Ginger is, too."

I laughed, feeling a little sorry for both—the *three*—of us.

"I had this sick thought cross my mind," I told Grace. "What happens when I win another dozen races, a title or two, and then Ferrari hires some torpedo to replace me? Am I going to get as possessive and bitchy as they are?"

"Nah. You'll just sign with another team and kick their ass for having the bad judgment to screw with you," Grace assured me.

"I haven't seen this kind of crap since back in F3000. Back then, it would be a couple ride-buyers having a dick-measuring contest, at least once a weekend. Made for good television, sure, but there'd be a guy from McLaren or Williams in the pits taking notes and all of a sudden, their short-lists just got a little shorter. But those kids weren't Manuel and Paolo—with damn good cars, lots of race wins already, money in the bank. And Manuel's won championships—hasn't he learned anything?

"Paolo's climbed up his ass. This macho shit...."

"I've noticed that you go out of your way to downplay any macho aspect of why you like to race. You try to debunk every aspect of your profession that seems larger than life," Grace said. "De-mystifying it. Why is that?"

"I said before, this isn't brain surgery."

"But you're lying, Don. Don't get a swelled head—but you're special."

I hesitated, sometimes you have to accept compliments. "Grace, not to get all self-deprecating on you, but there are most likely hundreds of people who can drive as good as Manuel or myself who will never get the chance. Ten drivers in Atlantics who couldn't get a sponsor due to *nobody's* fault. People in corners of the world where there are no cars! Guys begging in Calcutta—I won't apologize for the fact I was born in the West; indeed, I give

thanks every day.

“But the macho stuff. It’s perpetuated by the media. In the period between the wars, there was hardly any money in motorsport, you raced because you liked it. So there’s the romance, and add to that the fact that racing—most sports for that matter—were the province of the moneyed class in the old days. And those who weren’t rich were from a stratum of society that had little regard for their own lives—war will do that. *There’s* the macho aspect. When you’d been through Ypres, Verdun, Somme you were playing with house money, so dying in a wreck—or causing someone else’s death...shit happens. Then repeat that twenty-five years later with different men and a different war. You can see how macho and romance gets mixed up.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Grace admitted. “Hell of a selling point.”

“Exactly! Remember Hemingway? ‘Mountaineering, bullfighting, auto racing. The rest are games.’ He fused macho and romance and the press still hasn’t gotten past it.” And bullfighting isn’t even a sport...

“So, the few writers still around who had covered Grand Prix racing in the fifties and sixties complained about how technology eventually overcame personality in racing. They want to go back to when there were only six or eight races a year, when Formula One was a small, provincial, European exercise. And damn near amateur. Unfortunately for them, Formula One got big. Just like next year’s rock groups, the fans that found them first get jealous, they liked the band better when they were the only fans. The writers get a little pissed when Ferrari or McLaren or Williams takes some promising driver under their wing, or when some ‘starving artist’ gets a big contract. It’s really too bad, I learned about Grand Prix racing from reading those guys.

“They bitch about the ‘good old’ days, when there were twenty laps a lap at Monaco, when the drivers drove their cars up the stairs at some hotel on a bet, when they spent all night socializing and getting drunk, chasing women, then drove four hours in ‘real’ cars the next day in canvas helmets and polo shirts.

“Okay, fine. But what they forget is that when a car wrecked, more often than not, that driver they idolized, made money writing a biography about, traipsed around Europe with; died. And then the drivers became heroes and their writer buddies became semi-rich pundits.

“You see it in their writings even now, ‘any sport with no risk of death is no sport at all’, bullshit. I don’t want to die; I get a great deal of satisfaction in driving well, but I can’t see how I can feel any better by driving in a deathtrap of a car, on tracks like those in the old days.

“I liked the old days, too, but it’s time to move on.”

“Take a breath, Don,” Grace chuckled.

I did. “Thanks for letting me riff.

“But as for all this glamour, I think of it as a privilege, something I have to encourage in others, while not dwelling upon it or wallowing in it.”

“I just happen to be good at racing. I’m not any more of a man than anyone else just because I’ve got more points. Neither am I more important than Marie or John because my job is slightly more dangerous than theirs and vastly more profitable. I just like to race. It’s

not the most important thing in my life, it just appears that way right now. I have more important things left to do.”

“Such as what?”

“I don’t want to intimidate you, but I want to be a good husband and father. Marie and John work so hard at that, I’d love to sink my teeth in something that deep, I really would. Here’s my arrogance again, but I’d be great.”

“Why should I feel intimidated by that?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I fumbled. “It’s just that I have this image of our eyes meeting over a crib at three in the morning, that’s all.”

“That’s neat,” she giggled. “Though that’s a hell of a marriage proposal.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I’ll try to do better when I’m ready.”

“You will, and you will,” she breezily assured me. Glad you’re so confident, I thought. Of course, I love her and that’s reciprocated; but this huge gulf between loving someone and marrying them that blocks further daydreaming on my part—Grace seems to have blown way past that. She’s not making presumptions, it’s just another external manifestation of her self-assuredness.

And me, who makes decisions in the car every instant, who gave the Ferrari offer only seconds of thought, who selects from three options at once when it comes to my stores—this one stops me in my tracks.

Hungary:

Capitalism always wins. As much credit as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Karol Wojtyła deserve, it was J. R. Ewing that forced the Soviet Union into over-extension and therefore unsustainability. Some would say that the creation of a Hungarian Grand Prix was a reaction to relentless capitalism, I hold that it was instead an inspiration to eastern Europe, just as J.R. was. The communists gave an inch—the overture to have a race in the first place, to put a human face on socialism.

Capitalism took a mile. The idea of cars other than entry-level Fiats, Trabants and Ladas—the idea of *racing* cars in the first place...the track lined with sponsor billboards for brands not sold in Hungary, for products that didn’t *exist* in Hungary...Beautiful People, grid girls, paparazzi—how were you going to keep ‘em down on the collective farm after they saw that?

Capitalism always eats itself. First-world problems like how to pay Lacroix for the privilege to hold a race while the EU banned tobacco advertising. Solved by a government subsidy, how novel...

After the passage of a generation, the passing of a few societal paradigms, the novelty has worn off the reality of the Hungarian Grand Prix. To be fair, we’re left with an appreciative home crowd, an impressive amount of German and Italian fans...and an absolute shit track.

“Monaco without walls” is apt. Although you’re not likely to wreck another car trying to pass—the straights aren’t long enough to close up on another car—you can’t pass without the agreement of the driver in front. And when you consider that I spent the entire Monaco GP staring at the back of Paolo’s rear wing as the Ferraris finished one-two and every car that made the finish did so on the lead lap, needless to say I wasn’t looking forward to the race.

But you can still test a car. Thursday, I was set to run Ford’s three-five around the Hungaroring in one of last years’ chassis. Moore had arranged to have the track to ourselves, although everyone else knew what we were doing that day. The bodywork resembled that of the new Ferrari at Jerez, the striping didn’t line up, lettering stopped in mid-word.

I got started early, doing three twenty-lap runs before lunch. I wasn’t trying to break track records, but we checked things like fuel consumption; mileage on the dyno is usually better than on the track. Also, the Ford engineers were keeping a close eye on the telemetry, making sure the temperatures stayed consistent.

Sixty laps, no leaks, the engine doing what an engine should do. I was enjoying the challenge of learning to drive normally aspirated engines again. With a turbo, no matter how advanced the engine management system is, there is still a lag time until the turbo kicks in, and then the power comes in all at once. Therefore, among other things driving through a corner is different between the two types of engines. With a turbo, you want to take a line that will allow you to keep your foot on the gas, to be in as much of a straight line through the corner as possible, so you don’t spin the car when the power shows up. It depends on the driver and the corner, but some people trail the brakes and step on the gas at the same time, to avoid the turbo lag.

But with a ‘normal’ car, you are more in control of the throttle modulation—the car can be drifted, thrown around more. Not any more or less fun, however, just different. I cut my teeth on normally aspirated cars, I hadn’t even driven a turbo until I got to Europe.

Anyhow, first thing after lunch, out I went again with a new engine chip, four new tires and a quarter-tank of fuel. Sanjay had come down for the test, along with Bill, I had some new voices to talk to on the radio. I was telling Sanjay that anyone who bitched about testing forgot how they got started, I didn’t mind being alone on the track.

Starting my second lap, I was at speed nearing the braking point for the first corner. Just as I was downshifting, the lower arm on the left front suspension snapped. Amazing what minutiae you can see in circumstances such as these: Stress fractures appearing in the steering arm just before it broke completely, a sliver of titanium exploding from the crack, a cloud of decompressed nitrogen escaping from my front tire as shrapnel went into it.

It was a good thing that my right hand was on the shift lever when the suspension broke, for when the steering arm went, the tire on the left side turned full left, the shock coming back through the column and banging my left wrist. I noted a stab of pain, then I crossed my arms across my chest—keeping my thumbs out of the steering wheel.

The fun was just beginning, however, as the car continued left into the guardrail, rolling over after it hit. Telemetry showed my speed on impact to be 140, decelerating to zero in a second, then the car went back across the track on its rollbar. The rear of the car took another righteous lick on the opposite side of the track, my head wound up wedged in the ‘L’

formed by the guardrail and the ground.

Being held in by the belts, it wasn't an altogether uncomfortable position, I reflected as I watched a ladybug crawl through the grass. I wasn't concerned about fire, but I was worried about the radiators overflowing onto my back and legs. But within fifteen seconds a marshal was there with a pressurized-water tank and I could see about a half-dozen pairs of legs running up to the car.

It's strange, the things you say while dazed: "Just wait 'til my crew gets here to turn it over, no need for you to get a hernia." I heard a course car pull up, then Brian yelled to me. A cervical collar was placed around my neck for liability's sake, then the car slowly came over. When I had convinced the doctors that I wasn't in Sedalia, they lifted me out.

I walked about ten feet away, then turned to regard the wreck. All four corners had been beaten off of the car, both wings, too. The bodywork was scattered across the track, leaving a bare tub with the engine attached. I rode to the medical center with Sanjay and Bill, testing my wrist and not liking what I felt.

I was distracted from my discomfort by Sanjay's reaction, he'd apparently seen something in the suspension that he didn't like, and he was climbing all over me with apologies.

"No wonder you don't come to the races," I tried to laugh in between spasms of pain. I knew what was worrying him; suspension pieces, especially his, don't break. But shit happens—I wasn't about to call my lawyer.

In his mind, he had sent me out in a gasoline tanker with no brakes. I was glad that he was concerned, but...

"Really, it's no big deal. I've felt worse after winning races." He shook his head in disbelief, as Moore chuckled. "I'm not kidding. I passed a kidney stone once just before a feature at Omaha."

In the hospital, there was the usual x-ray routine, while waiting for the pictures we watched a replay of the wreck. Magyar Television (yep, MTV) was setting up their cameras at the time, lucky us, the wreck occurred entirely in their field of vision. It was an ugly mother, I saw my head hit the steering wheel, which I didn't remember happening. The FIA doctors let me know that would earn me a CAT scan, too.

Sanjay had seen enough, he was heading out the door as Ken was coming in. Ken steered him back into the room by putting his arm around him. To be honest, I was glad to see Ken, right at that minute, I wasn't in a condition to take charge of Sanjay.

"I'm sorry you had to see this, Sanjay, but we've both done analyses of worse wrecks, it's just that those were back at the shop. Don's okay, that chassis wasn't one we needed, we'll be all right.

"Get out to the corner, Brian and Marcel are waiting to help you pull off what you need, you need to focus on something. If by some wild coincidence, this is a problem shared with our other cars, then I need you to tell me one way or the other."

Sanjay took a breath, nodded, then headed out. Bill was already back there—he had a V-12 that needed to be tarped before Ferrari and Honda got nosy.

Ken sat next to me, watching the tape as it ran again for his benefit. "You hit worse

than at Hockenheim,” he observed.

Needless to say, that was all for the test. Ken waited for the doctors to set my wrist, I got some good news when they couldn’t find any internal bleeding. My brain scan was normal—nothing up there...

We drove to our hotel, nothing to do until the swelling went down some. If this had happened tomorrow, I’d have had to answer a thousand questions from the media, but today, there were just the locals.

I needed to call Grace. Carol answered, the fact that I usually called from so many time zones meant she didn’t consider the time of this call to be unusual.

But Grace did. “Hi, honey. What’s the occasion?”

“Well darlin’, I wrecked the car.” It was the only thing I could think to say, but my choice of words made her laugh.

“Sorry, Don, are you okay?”

“Physically, yes. Just a broken wrist.”

“Oh, is that all?” she said cavalierly. “How’s the car?”

“What car?”

“Are you serious?” I heard her yell for Carol to turn on CNN. “How bad was it?”

“Looked bad. You know—the ones that look the worst are the ones you walk away from. That’s why I wanted to call, I wanted you to hear it from me before you caught it halfway on television and shit your pants.”

“That’s awfully considerate,” she allowed. I told her I’d call her when she arrived home and I’d gotten some rest. She said that she’d call Marie. I took a couple of straight Tylenol and laid back in a recliner.

Three hours later, I awoke, called Ken and told him that I’d wander down to the lounge and photo-op anyone that happened by until he arrived. AP and Reuters were pissed, there had been no still photographs taken of the wreck, they had to pay out their asses for an image taken from the television feed, and that wasn’t the best quality, anyhow.

Ken and Jan wandered in, we drove back to the track. Jan has been requested by the district police not to drive on their roads for a few years, so Jan has to bum rides whenever we’re here. Indeed, a police car followed us from the hotel.

While I thought I was holding up my end of the conversation, it was obvious to them that there was something on my mind.

“You’re thinking about something other than your wrist,” Ken mused.

“You know I’ve always been honest with you,” I replied without any preliminaries. “Of all people, I know I’ll occasionally eat the fence and it always could be worse than this,” I indicated my wrist. Until now, I had been staring out the window, but they deserved to have me look them in the eyes. “What bothers me is that no matter what ‘shit happens’, I’m too far away from Grace.”

“Yeah, and your name’s still wet on Enzo’s contract,” Jan said.

“So what?” was Ken’s rejoinder. “That’s no big deal, we all know what paper is worth in this business.”

“I’ve never done that before, I don’t want to set a precedent, either. Too bad about me

and my insecurities. What I need to do is get in my car again,” though I had to catch “I guess” before it was too late.

The FIA doctors, Jan’s trainer, even Ferrari’s physio fussed with my cast in our motorhome. I had another reason to be thankful it was my left hand; I could still hold the wheel in my left reasonably well but replicating the shifting motion with my left hand hurt like hell.

Sanjay came in, holding the steering arm in one hand and rolling a front wheel/tire assembly in with the other. “Found it,” he announced cheerlessly. “What’s missing off this wheel?” I was asked, I took a look, noticing that a wheel weight was missing off the rim. I could see the residue from the duct tape used to hold it on.

“This weight right here?” he tossed the lead onto the table. “You could accept it flying off in the wreck, but I found it a hundred feet back up the track. By the time you noticed the vibration, you had other things to worry about.

“But the car felt it immediately. You couldn’t duplicate this anywhere else, the combination of harmonic vibration in the wheel, the loading on the suspension, and,” he paused for a breath, “the strength of this particular batch of titanium. Before you get excited, Ken, this was last year’s specification. Different lot of metal this year.” Sanjay looked like he’d solved a murder, I was glad he hadn’t.

“You mean to tell me I drove all last year with this scrap metal?” I chuckled.

Past midnight, I called Grace back. The video had been all over the sports shows, she had a chance to see it several times.

“Christ, you don’t do anything halfway,” was the way she started the conversation.

“Well, the things some people will do to impress their girl.” We talked about my wrist, what caused the wreck and how it looked for the race. I could imagine her on the couch, heels kicked off, stocking feet on the coffee table as she waited for SportsCenter to come on. Her pearls clicked as we talked, I wondered about her cheerful mood, wondering if it was disguising something else.

“What do you feel when you see that?” I wondered.

“I figured that if it was the big one, you were enjoying what you were doing.” Pretty straight answer, but—“and the last thing you had thought of was me.”

There was no smart reply to that. Hearing her say those words, the way she phrased it, made me feel like I hadn’t figured everything out. A moment, two—static, data tones buzzed in the background.

“Can you take next week off?” I asked. “I want to take you to Brunswick.”

She knew it was something other than *want*; kept it to herself. “It’s my company, duh. School’s back in—got a few weeks lull before we start on Christmas.”

“It’s time, honey. Probably past time.”

“Shush. Don’t say that.”

I arrived at the track Friday just a little sleepy, but mostly anxious to get in the car and do something positive. I’d slept the night before by only a broad definition, my wrist throbbing variably, not allowing me to get into REM. No drugs, even though the docs said I

was allowed; I didn't want to have something floating around in my system just to reappear halfway through qualifying.

Jan had to do the bulk of the setup, I managed just five laps in practice and qualifying combined on Friday. No matter, nobody could touch the Ferraris again this weekend. They were first and second, Jan was a second behind, I was *three*. Nobody was complaining much, after Thursday, we all wanted to get out of town in one piece, render unto Ferrari what was theirs.

Besides my wreck, the topic of conversation in the garage was the glacial atmosphere in the Ferrari pit. All the Italian journalists made a stop in my motorhome to ask for my impressions of my new team.

"I can't see what they're trying to accomplish," I told them. "They're driving harder in morning practice than I would the last lap of qualifying. They must have cars to burn back at Maranello. If they have any hopes of getting the constructors', Zancana should tell them to drive like grandmothers."

To Jan and me, it looked like two kids fighting for daddy's attention, seeing who could be the biggest prick. At the end of each day's work, it was off to their helicopters, along with their favorite journalists.

"Maybe I've been spoiled too long," I remarked to Paul and Stephen during dinner Saturday night. "Bullshit like that makes me want to be a team manager. If either of them so much as bent a wing on the other, then they'd be washing and waxing the transporter."

"Well, they're like eight-hundred-pound gorillas," Paul pointed out. "Where do they sit? Anywhere they want!"

"Yeah, how do you tell a Formula One star how to drive?"

Saturday had proved to be slower than Friday, the temperature went up a good twenty degrees, we hardly went out at all, though Ferrari beat their cars a little more. This continued during the Sunday morning warmup, for no discernable reason.

At the start of the race, they both locked up their brakes trying to keep the other one behind, they went through most of the first lap side by side. Paolo managed to lead the first part of the race, though he had to molest his tires to do so. Manuel would fall back through the corners, then close up on the exits and then draft Paolo on the straights. He could have fried his engine running that close for so long, but apparently he thought that risk worth taking. What it did do was to take air off of Paolo's rear wing, and make his car loose as hell. As the tires got worse, Paolo had to work harder and got less in return for his efforts.

But the pit stops would take care of that, it figured. The two of them came in together, which was out of the ordinary, but then Manuel got done slightly quicker, and blocked Paolo all the way down the pit lane. Paolo showed his impatience, actually trying to pass Manuel in the pits, scattering crew from other teams and giving the press something to write about.

All this bullshit occurred out of my view, I was forced to take it easy, driving with one and a half arms. The Ferraris lapped me within fifteen circuits, Jan after twenty-five. It was actually quite lonely, the car was working just fine, no doubt surprised at the way I was babying it.

Watching NBC later was a hoot, as Manuel and Paolo blew past me, they both

acknowledged my wave past, then Manuel chopped Paolo off going into the corner. Next lap, a wave from each to the second-place McLaren, then Manuel gave Paolo a brake test down the straight. Lap after that, waves to the formerly first-place McLaren, then they proceeded to put tire marks on each other's sidepods.

After their pit stops, Manuel disappeared and it seemed to me that he'd played Paolo like a drum during the first part of the race, because he pulled twenty seconds on him, setting fastest laps at will. On the last lap, Paolo's left front blew, fortunately it was in the middle of some slow corners, so he didn't wreck or damage the car too much.

After Spain, everyone in the paddock had pretty much figured that Manuel wasn't going to let Paolo show him up again, so Manuel got a win that everyone had expected, one way or the other. As for Paolo, he got a driving lesson from the master, though it remained to be seen whether he had recognized it or not.

So Jan came in second, no major dramas, though he had a tire go down and had to hit the pits again. He hauled ass through the field, passing both the McLarens in the last five laps and Paolo in the last corner. As for me, I came sixth, nearly two laps down. The whole team from top to bottom was just happy to be done with the weekend and to get back home.

But we were struck how Jan ran his race, Simon mentioned to him during our debrief that "You did everything you could have, you drove a Don Peterson race. The car was good enough for third and despite the tire, you made sure you got that third. Second was a gift. Best race I've seen from you, including your wins."

Jan nodded, thanked Simon. *He knows*, I thought. *Top of the pyramid. He's here.* "Next year," I told him. "Gonna be fun."

Monday, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* ran a story in which Paolo claimed that his team had fitted the wrong compound tires during his stop, he was being punished for the way he won Spain.

His contention was that he got four of Michelin's hardest tires, when he didn't need that for only half a race on a light fuel load. The particular compound mentioned in the story was, in fact, a type that wore only slightly more than your average bowling ball. On the surface, Paolo had a point. But I'd wait until I was old before Ferrari would comment on *that* one way or the other.

Jan saw the story too, he called and we decided that Paolo would best serve himself by shutting up and concentrating on his driving. But the more I thought, if I wanted to fuck with my driver's head, I'd screw with his tire selection when he's in the middle of a pit stop and there's precious little he could do about it.

Manuel called just after I had rung off with Jan. This was new, on the odd occasion we needed to phone, I had always called him.

He had heard from his man in the press that Zancana was requesting me to select my co-driver, he wanted to hear my side of that story.

He seemed shaken, slipping from Italian to his native Spanish occasionally. "Hey," I told him in pit-lane Italian, "I just work for Ferrari, Fiat actually, if they want me to screw in

taillights on a production line, then that's okay with me. I'm a happy idiot when administrivia is concerned." That was somewhat of a lie, I guess. For my own benefit, I suppose but in any case Manuel overestimated my pull with Zancana.

I continued by telling him that in a perfect world, Jan would still be my co-driver, Ken would still be running the team, and so on, but...

I'll mention again that Manuel had helped me get established in Formula One and he's a very good friend, but not to the point where he'd accept my counsel as the gospel truth in this, or any situation. That's probably why we're such good friends...but it did seem like he was asking for my opinion as to that was happening, that was a major step for someone as self-assured; okay, arrogant, as him.

That word *macho* kept creeping into the conversation. By no means was I as fanatical about Ferrari, or wanting to drive one of their cars, as your typical Latin. But I was more emotional on the subject than a Northern European, for example. However, I told Manuel that I wouldn't judge my manhood or my worth as a human being on which team I drove for.

There was a pause, I could hear Marlena singing to herself in the background. Manuel resumed in a voice that wasn't condescending, but it was clear by his tone that I'd never really understand.

"To best describe how I feel about Ferrari," he replied, "would be to say that I was a fan of breathing, or that I was fond of food and water."

I whistled silently, yeah, I knew what he meant. But to actually hear someone, especially Manuel say that...

"Before I even knew how to drive, I wanted to be with Ferrari. Despite all those race wins I had before joining them, I wasn't half the driver I am now. No matter how much I applied myself, and I was a real bastard back in those days, I just couldn't succeed like I knew I could. As soon as I got in the Ferrari, I could feel myself getting better. I was more than a driver—than an employee. I was welcomed. I fit.

"And if I were told that I wasn't needed by them, it would be as if my wife told me the same thing. I know someday that it will be time for me to go, but I can't honestly say that time is now."

To hear a four-year-old whine about sharing his toys was one thing. But this was Manuel, and he wasn't whining, it sounded more pitiful than that. Sad wasn't the word, either, but Goddamn! I thought of the old chestnut 'better to have loved and lost than to never have loved', but then I imagined Grace leaving me, my c-stores being tornadoed or flooded. Thinking of those things scared me, to be honest. Racing pales in contrast; elementally it's a pastime for me, though a highly profitable one.

Right?

Maybe not everyone thought the way I did, that was even more disquieting. I rang off with Manuel, nothing concrete had been decided, but maybe nothing could ever be. I implored him to call at any time if he had anything to discuss. That sounded funny, like I was a counselor at a suicide prevention hotline, but I was beyond worrying how things came across.

Maybe he didn't have the right priorities, but I'll be damned if either of us had the

wrong ones.

Austria:

“How’s the wrist?”

“Good enough to do this,” I allowed, reaching up her dress, finding her stocking-tops, finding her ticklish. She protested that although she had to drive, I had nothing better to do than pet her in public. The flush in her cheeks told me that she wasn’t complaining, the honks from the trucks alongside indicated that no one else did, either.

Grace and I were stopped in road construction on I-285 on Friday morning, watching planes taxi around Hartsfield. I had been in plaster up until yesterday afternoon, Grace’s G.P. had looked at my wrist while on a video conference with the F1 medical staff and decided that it was ready to be freed. I’d put a brace on when it came time for Austria.

I couldn’t believe that I was plodding along the Interstate with a lady whose skirt would occasionally be up around her waist as she drove, and who spent so little time worrying about it. I was glad for the anonymity of the Atlanta freeways, no one could tell who the groper in the Accord was.

“I know how Marie and John felt when I’d tell them to get a room.” It felt great to be in that position; ever since the day their eyes had met, through ten years and two kids, they’ve been on each other like a Golden Retriever on a Yorkie, and sometimes it was hard to tell who was who.

It was probably dumb luck, but F1 had seen fit to give us Labor Day weekend off and I wasn’t about to complain. Indeed, I had been looking forward to the holiday since the schedule had come out. Sure, there were reasons why wanting a break turned into *needing* one, but the fact remained that I was glad to be heading home, to be pulled to the bosom of my loved ones—with their disparate motivations...

Walking through the airport, it was apparent what a difference three months of ever-increasing publicity made. At least twenty people came up to us and asked for my autograph. Since they were business types for the most part, it wasn’t a riot, but it was interesting to experience it on this side of the Atlantic.

“I haven’t been mobbed since I was sleeping with that rock band a few years ago,” Grace said.

“It will be worse in St. Louis,” I replied, ignoring her. “Max probably told the television stations when I was coming.”

“Do you want to get off the plane first?” she wondered, “make a better photo op?”

“Hell, no. If they want to take pictures, they might as well shoot someone good looking.”

“Aww, you’re so romantic. Do you want me to blow you here, or on the plane?”

So we came off at Lambert holding hands and sure enough, there were crews from all the stations and the *Post-Dispatch* at the terminal. I gave them about twenty minutes, and the same thing happened as at Hartsfield—my audience was polite toward Grace, but never asked who she was, or if we were an item—nothing. Grace and I discussed it, did they assume

she was from one of my sponsors? Did I pick her up on the plane? Whatever...

Then it was off to the National counter, in keeping with my expansive mood I eschewed my usual Ford for a Lincoln. "There's some old cheerleader from school I want to impress," I explained, which got me an elbow in the kidney.

We took our time getting home, showing her the Coca-Cola plant, so it was about six when we entered Brunswick. Even though the Lincoln was unusual, the news of my arrival made it up the hill before I did. My folks almost beat me to Marie's house, the first thing Mom did was check my wrist, then she introduced herself to Grace by giving her a hug. Daniel and Theresa found her presence to be acceptable, they ran off. The cat had a new friend, curling up on Grace's lap soon after she sat on the front porch.

It was a wonderful evening for Labor Day weekend, cloudy and about seventy, so a steady stream of neighbors wandered by on the sidewalk. I hadn't wanted to show Grace off to the town, per se, but that's how it turned out. She didn't mind at all, she told me it was a nice change to shake hands with people and not pull away with someone's business card.

Within two hours Mom had rooted around to find *my* baby pictures, I figured Grace was officially in the family. I wandered into the kitchen for a beer, Marie was there with a couple Michelobs.

First, she manipulated my wrist, then she half-whispered, half-screamed in my ear. "She's great, Don!" I was glad for her approval, jumping slightly when I heard her words.

A diesel pulled up in the drive, John came in through the kitchen. "Nice car," he greeted me, followed by "can we borrow it?" I caught the we, as I looked at Marie, who at first rolled her eyes.

I twirled the key ring. Sure enough, Marie's expression became mildly solicitous. "What the hell, leather wipes off," I decided, throwing the keys up for a jump-ball.

"Hold my beer," Marie yelled over her shoulder.

Back on the porch, Grace and Mom were laughing over some bare-butt picture of me. "Wonder where our car's going?" Grace asked while taking that half-full bottle from me, watching the Lincoln spray gravel.

"John and Marie took it, I guess he had something come up," I deadpanned, as the folks exchanged clucks. "They're probably heading out to your place." Six hundred acres of August-high corn could hide a Lincoln nicely, even if the car was bouncing.

My folks decided to take the kids back to their house instead of waiting for their parents to get unstuck. I read some mail while Grace got ready for bed, listening as the house creaked in the wind.

Grace padded across the hardwood. She had a flannel nightgown on, a little too thick for Missouri in summer, but that's what the buttons were for. As I demonstrated.

"Pervert," she laughed. Her gaze turned to the wall behind me, and my three-quarter-assed attempt at decorating. "I recognize the Ansel Adams, but what's the other one?"

"That's a volcano erupting on Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean. Spent three weeks there last winter, and the volcano was kind enough to erupt for me." About the only place on earth without race fans, and hardly the need to speak English. A perfect vacation.

Like this was bad? I wanted to pull her onto the bed with me, but she was feeling

playful, turning toward me, resettling on my lap. Fair enough, I said to myself, smelling that morning's perfume as I licked her earlobe. Despite the temperature, my ministrations caused her skin to prick up. Still, she pretended to be interested in the decor. "Karsh, an Escher, is this one of yours, too?" She must have meant the tornado picture.

"Yeah, I climbed onto the roof of my house the summer I lived in Fort Worth, back when I was young and reckless."

"Now you're old and reckless," she pointed out, chuckling. "Why all the photographs?"

"As opposed to more paintings? Because photographs don't lie. Paintings are the opinion, I suppose, of the artist. Any interpretation of yours is superimposed or compared to the artist's. But that tornado, for example. I know what that is, all I want to do is look at it, study it, not wonder what some artist was thinking."

"Fair enough, but why this Escher?"

"Because it doesn't even pretend to be real, it makes you think, manipulates your brain." By now, I was manipulating a 44D goosebump that had developed on Grace's chest. She had stopped commenting on my room's decor and began to concentrate on what I was doing.

Which quickly stopped as a cicada began buzzing outside the window, Grace had to be pried off the ceiling. "What in the hell is that?" she sputtered.

"A cicada, locust, basically a cricket with a hormone problem."

She gathered it together, pulled the blinds up. There he was, humming on the screen, bothered only slightly by the light. "What's he doing?"

"He's horny, and doesn't mind advertising it," I explained. "Don't they have them down south?"

"They're banned in Atlanta, I guess."

I chuckled at that. "First and last time I ever rode a motorcycle, I hit one of them. Cracked my visor, damn near laid the bike over."

John and Marie pulled up, so the bug flew off. Grace continued to rest on the sill as they walked up the drive.

"How does the corn look?" Grace wondered.

"Damn, I knew I forgot something," John replied. He finally introduced himself to Grace.

"Where's Don?" John asked, though I heard Marie stifle a laugh.

"He's practicing his cursive...with his tongue," Grace deadpanned. John laughed his ass off, Marie waited until he was done—

"Grace, now I know you're full of shit; dumbass race car drivers can barely spell their name, let alone sign it!"

That brought me to the window—"Funny, I never have problems cashing all them damn paychecks I've been getting!"

Saturday morning, I took Grace to see the station, then we watched trains and poked around the elevator. That afternoon, Mom and Marie took her out to the folks' house, not to

get her around the 'womenfolk' and find out some dirt on her, but just to hear Grace talk. I heard a full report when I saw her again about three, we were heading out to the Missouri for a picnic and whatever else came up.

"I didn't mind it a bit," she said breezily. "Just found out more shit about you, that's all!" That was Jake with me, both my family spilling and her knowing.

John and the kids were washing the Lincoln after the previous night's off-roading, so I wheeled out my old pickup. Grace looked at the F-150, then at the rental, shrugged, and jumped in.

She leaned around to the back to check on our picnic, I got a faceful of her buns when I turned to follow her progress. We actually had to shop for an ensemble for her to bum around in, she hadn't a pair of blue jeans in her possession previously. Thursday night, she had dragged me to Belk for my input.

She laughed as we looked through the racks, trying on a few that I was noncommittal about until she came out with some without back pockets. I insisted that she buy those, hell, I'd even do it. When she was told why I liked them, she called me a swine and bought three pairs!

That pocket-less butt of hers jiggled about five feet in front of me as we found a decent spot along the river. We relaxed on the riverbank, listened to trains and the occasional boat whistle. No one bothered us as we alternately ate and slept most of the afternoon.

A cloud crossing the sun awoke me. Grace wasn't bothered, kept sleeping, so I busied myself skipping slate across the river.

All the excitement about seeing Grace again had pushed the Ferrari problem on the back burner for most of the week, but now I was free to ruminate on it. I was sure glad Manuel didn't hold me personally responsible for what was going on there; he had ripped Paolo a new asshole, and in front of a worldwide audience. If it had been me in his path, I could honestly say that the result would not have been any different. But why did I have to worry about it in the first place? You race the car, you compete against the clock, you defy the laws of physics; a romantic would say you cheat death, whatever that meant. But you shouldn't have to "kick someone's ass" in order to be successful. This isn't zero-sum, points are paid down to sixth, for crying out loud. Not winning isn't the same as losing, Manuel himself showed that last year. So why is this different?

I turned to find another handful of rocks, Grace confronted me, up from her nap. "I can tell you've been thinking again," she began, "stop. You're no good at it." I smiled, then leaned to kiss her. Three hours later, she broke it off and we held each other. Sure, she could read me, but sometimes I wanted to be read.

So it didn't take much prodding from her to get me to relate my conversation with Manuel. At first, she was smiling, hearing me open up, but the more she heard, the more concerned she became.

"So how about Paolo? Do you think he is as threatened by you as Manuel apparently is?"

"Paolo probably thinks this is normal," I guessed. What a way to go through life. Of course, it was my life, now.

"If Manuel's telling you this, what is he telling his wife?"

"Nothing, probably, and that makes no sense, either." I'm sure he needed all the help he could get. "Really, isn't that what a wife is for?"

Grace was looking at me with a raised eyebrow. How obvious was that?

We stared at each other, Grace breaking it off only when she determined I wasn't going to clarify or expand. "Show me how to skip rocks," she said with a contented smile.

A line of thunderstorms stretching from around, I guessed, Sedalia to Carrollton had replaced the occasional cumulus. We weren't too far from getting belted, but I was reluctant to move an inch. I liked it here. I liked my company.

Grace pointed out that Ken, SSC, and Ford would take a dim view of me getting hit by lightning. We didn't have much to pack up, but the rain still got us as we were running for the car. I was relieved to find my defroster still worked, as our sweat and the rain had fogged up the windows.

I rolled into the quonset, but it was still coming down good, nothing to do but kill time necking in the car. When it let up, we bailed out to find John at the door of the garage, looking at the Lincoln.

"Never fucking fails," he grinned at Grace. "We haven't had a good rain since the early part of July—I guess I know how to fix that!" He threw a sponge at me when I clucked at the corn husks that he had washed out of the wheel wells.

When the storm abated, we ran into the house, Marie regarded Grace's unkempt hair, sodden shirt and misaligned bra with a wink toward both of us. I knew she wouldn't buy any explanation I would give, so I didn't bother. Which made me happy...

We had decided to take the kids to Marshall to see a movie after dinner. Grace said she'd be damned if she would look like she did for dinner, let alone to go out, so she rushed to get a bath before supper.

"She obviously doesn't know us yet," Mom said in a self-deprecating tone.

John added, "And if she's getting fixed up for Marshall, well..."

I helped with the cooking, as the rain came down anew, the spaghetti boiled on the stove, and Mike Shannon called the Cardinal game. Just like twenty-five years ago or more, just a few more people around, and a few more problems.

It was Dad's turn to ask about my wrist. "Well, it doesn't bother me, but again it does, I guess." Like that made any sense, I thought. "It's emblematic of all the things I have to deal with. Sure, there's driving, and you all know how I feel about the stores. But now, I've got Grace, she's woven herself into my life. That's another thing I can't get enough of, or do justice to. Along with The Paolo and Manuel Show, I've got this huge file tagged 'Shit I Can Barely Keep Up With'."

"She caught me brooding over that file this afternoon. Well, maybe that isn't the right adjective, that implies that there is a solution. Lord knows she deserves a sane man in her life, do I look like one?"

People were looking at each other, this was a hell of a speech for me. For once, Marie or John didn't have any smart retorts.

The whole kitchen looked expectantly at the door when we finally heard Grace bustling

toward us. She entered and gave a compelling argument for dressing for dinner. A red turtleneck, tight even for her, a white wraparound skirt. Accessorized, to boot, her hair was up in a white headband. She bent down to kiss me, I took in a deep breath of her shampoo and perfume, as I wrapped my arms around her. To think I ever got by without her holding me!

Grace loved our cooking, everyone enjoyed the conversation except me, I had too much on my mind. I excused myself rather quickly after dinner to shower, explaining that I wanted to be sure to get to Marshall on time, but mostly to get away from people using me as a launching pad for their conversations.

The kids did their part, waiting impatiently on the front porch as I came out of the bathroom. With that, we were off, Daniel manning the garage door opener as I backed the Lincoln out. Grace looked around, noticing the relative lack of racing mementos on the walls. To be exact, there was only one trophy extant, not unexpectedly, from my first Grand Prix win. "Why don't you keep them all?" Grace wondered.

"Well," as I left the driveway, "I'm more worried about the next race, rather than ones in the past."

"God, how macho," Theresa chimed in. "Did you bring waders, Grace?"

"So, when are you marrying my uncle?" Daniel asked Grace after a while.

"Well," Grace began, the accent coming back, "Can y'all keep a secret?" Nods, snickers. "Don and I were fixin' to go to Vegas for a quickie wedding, but your folks made us take you to the movies. After the show, how would you like to drive to Nevada with us?" Roars of approval, high fives in the back seat.

"Let's see. Kidnapping, Interstate flight; I think I'm leaving now." I turned to Grace. "Vegas? You have even less taste than I thought!"

Early Sunday morning, Grace woke me. The rain continued, with an occasional flash of lightning.

"Are you feeling all right?" she wondered.

"Thought I was, why do you ask?"

"Among other things, you wrapped yourself in the blanket so tight that I thought you'd suffocate." This was true enough; I couldn't unravel myself, so I stood up, hopped to the windowsill and watched the rain.

She followed me to the window and cradled me in her side. It felt so good to have her near, to be in her thoughts. It could almost calm my nerves to the point that I could look at things logically. Almost.

"I get the impression that this didn't happen before you met me," she sighed. Christ, I thought. I want to protect people from the fallout that occurs in my life, and look what happens.

"Grace, what if I told you I was this fucked-up on a regular basis; it isn't because of you? Would that make you feel less special?" Because I'd be lying: Things are getting more confusing, and you are an exceptional woman."

"Gee, that makes me feel better," she choked while laughing. One of her tears fell

onto my forehead, she smiled as she wiped it off. I found her hand, moved her finger to my mouth. “I couldn’t love a man who loved me but hated his work, so you’re paying me a compliment.”

“That’s the first thing I liked about you,” I sat up to face her. “I can’t count all the girls I’ve known who wanted to drop everything and move in with me as soon as they found out what I do. If you were one of them, you’d be happy living in Monaco and doing nothing all day long. But you love your career, it gives you, well, leverage.”

She slid down so she was in my lap. After this weekend, the sill would be worn down to the bare wood.

“Grace, if I were going to get married, it would be to you. But I can’t ask you to follow me, put your life aside for mine, or try to compromise it to fit.”

“There you go with your lousy marriage proposals again,” she laughed quietly. Our eyes met, it was my turn to get teary. It was getting light out. “Honestly, I can’t see me quitting. I can’t wind up Grace, Limited even if I wanted to.”

“Which means we’ll see each other in airports, that’s all,” I mentioned.

“So what? We wouldn’t be the first couple to fuck in hospitality lounges.”

She stood up and leaned over me, I could see all the way down to her tummy as she pulled me to my feet. “You ask Marie, she’ll tell you that they don’t just decide something in one night, one week or whatever. You continue to readjust and correct and move forward forever and ever and ever.”

“But I’m so scared, Grace. Afraid of trapping you in something you hadn’t expected. I can’t take a step forward, can’t say the first syllable. I know we’re in love, but I can’t use passion and lust to resolve things.”

“Don, you’re going to have to work hard at losing me. The fact that our future concerns you so just makes my heart swell—the *last* thing you’re doing is taking me for granted. I know I belong to you, and I know you will take care of me. And that’s the best feeling in the world.

“If I thought for one moment that you were assuming things about me, expecting me to just sit by while nothing gets accomplished, then the last thing you’d feel was me ripping your balls off. But that’s not the point, because it hasn’t happened.”

Eleven O’clock that morning, Marie banged on the door yelling “Darlington will be on in a half hour,” which finally got us out of bed. We both needed a shower, we made it into the kitchen just in time for the start.

Marie chuckled as we stumbled in, rubbing our eyes and pushing our wet hair out of our faces. “I’m just glad he’s finally getting laid on a regular basis!”

Grace and I smiled at each other, Marie noticed our lack of denial.

Or admission. “Wait a second...*still*?”

“Been busy.”

“Do you guys need any help?” Marie asked. “Pointers? Peer review?”

“We’re good, Marie. Thanks for the offer, though!” Grace laughed.

My parents arrived, Dad and John came into the family room to watch the race, while

Grace went out on the porch with Mom and Marie, returning to watch replays of the wrecks. I was slumped in a recliner, letting the call of the race bring back names of people I had known from racing, John and Dad filled me in on who else was running in ASA or Outlaws. I admit I was tired, but nothing a few Diet Cokes couldn't handle. John turned to me and remarked, "I hear you took the kids to Vegas last night. How'd the wedding go?"

I groaned with exaggerated agony. "Halfway there, she told me of this big ol' tattoo she got when she was drunk once. Small of her back, no hiding it. Couldn't find a machine shop open that late on a Saturday night, I wasn't able to get it sanded off. Maybe some other day."

"I heard that," Grace sang from the porch. "It's not a tramp-stamp, and he hasn't found it yet, either. He's been getting closer, though."

Everyone else besides me thought that was funny. I rolled my eyes and sunk even further in the chair. "She's quick," John noted.

"Oh, shit, Grace," Marie choked on her soda. "You're as much as a wiseass as him. He's luckier than he thinks," Marie said.

"No, Marie, I think he understands just how lucky he is."

During a yellow flag, the producers ran a filler on one of the drivers getting his pilot's license, showing a day in the life, the guy roaming around the Southeast in his twin-engine turboprop. Dad remarked about being able to just jump in and fly home from each race.

"No way in hell I'd do that," I replied. "The number of idiots who are up there already, the smart guys can't help but be picked off by the amateurs eventually. Don't forget blizzards and tornadoes. Give me a nice safe race car any day, and I'll let Delta do the worrying for me." Still, how would racing in the afternoon and humping in your own bed at night sound? Ah, well, maybe in the next life.

I wanted to get back to St. Louis at a decent hour, so we began to pack up, gather our baggage and throw away our trash. From the kitchen, I heard Grace ask the room if I had always wanted to be a race car driver. I smiled in anticipation of some charming anecdote from my childhood, but still, I was surprised.

"Don must have been six years old," Dad began. "We had this horrible ice storm, they called school off. The bus stops at the corner, where the c-store is now. I watched out the window as he tried to climb the hill, he was falling down trying to walk on the ice. This went on for about fifteen minutes, he was getting more frustrated with each attempt. I yelled at him to get in the store, when he arrived, I saw that he'd fallen hard at least once, his nose was bloody, his knees were skinned, he looked like shit."

I leaned in the doorway. I remembered that day, but I hadn't thought it relevant to anything. Dad continued, "So, I cleaned him up, as I did, I saw in his eyes that he was at the point where he'd start crying if only his brain would just stop racing for a second. I thought he was pissed, or else totally confused about what happened. It turns out, he was replaying the incident in his head in order not to repeat it."

"That evening he cleaned out his closet and found the sneakers he'd worn that summer, with the tread worn completely off. He then went out into the street, re-creating the circumstance and practicing how to walk on the ice. Now, that was a bad storm—I fell a

few times myself—but soon, he was cruising along like it was August. I went out at ten to throw him into bed, and the expression on his face...his eyes were wide open, darting around so fast I couldn't follow them. His hat and gloves were off so his ears and fingers could sense his balance better, I guessed. His coat was off, hell, he'd have taken his shoes off if he'd needed to. I brought him in, he wasn't proud of himself, really, just relieved to have solved this balance problem. He gave the impression that if you presented him with another challenge tomorrow, he'd handle that one, too."

I was behind Grace's chair by now, as Mom finished the story. "You know, you see a baby banging on a piano any his folks will say 'Aww, she's going to be a concert pianist' or some crap like that. Well, his dad was telling me what he had done when we were getting ready for bed that night, when he was done he concluded 'He's going to be a race car driver.'"

"I said 'Why? All he's doing is walking in the street', and he replied 'Because his brain's so tightly hooked into his senses, he's like a computer. He anticipated what was going to happen before it did, and was ready to compensate for it.'" Now that wasn't the only time Ron bragged up his kids, but that was the first and last time he made a prediction. He didn't tell Don about it, either, but look what happened!"

That floored me, of course Dad was perceptive, but this was something else. For his part, he just looked a little smug about it.

Getting ready for farewells, I thumbed through a recent copy of the state road map that was lying on the counter top. Used to be I would recall places I'd been, later on, it became a wish list of things I wanted to see. I still had the same yearnings, but now I needed a bigger map! Still, it was useful for daydreaming, recalling from the last time I'd studied one; what roads had been widened, what railroads had been abandoned.

"They get 71 built into Savannah?" I wondered, like anyone in the house would know. The map showed it extending to a junction with I-29 and I-229, sending a lot more traffic into the town. Might be a hell of a place to put a station, if someone else hadn't thought of it earlier.

"We know anyone in St. Joseph?" and this time I got a response.

"Rolodex," Dad told me. "St. Joseph Tobacco and Candy. What the hell, it's worth a shot."

"Yeah, it's the holiday and all, but talk is cheap," I agreed with him. "Who'd I be talking to, who's your guy up there?"

"Gene Eads, VP in marketing."

On a holiday weekend, I fully expected to get an answering machine, so I wasn't disappointed to hear the recording listing a handful of contact names and cell numbers, Eads' was one of them. So, I turned around and called *that* number.

"Good afternoon, sir, Don Peterson with Pump 'n Run," I greeted him.

"Knew it would be you guys, I recognized the prefix," he replied. "What can I talk you out of?"

I told him what I was thinking, he came back with "Yeah, that corner is just as bare as when they got done grading the cutoff, two nice corners, traffic light, on the Savannah utilities." He admitted that his company had kept an eye on the property, since it was indeed

a good location, and they would want to serve the store that would eventually open up there.

“Who’s the realtor?” I wondered. He read off a name, I repeated it to the family, John nodded in recognition. “Cool, we’re on to them,” I told Gene. “How’d you like some business?”

“Kick ass,” I exclaimed when I was off the phone. “New store, new money.” I was in a good mood, having actually done some company business this time through.

“You know,” Mom told Grace, “Don will be the last one to admit it, but about once a year, he comes in, does this exact thing. He stares at a map, or reads the property transactions from around here, makes a few calls, then leaves.”

“And then we have to call the realtors, contractors, and grocery suppliers, do all the hard work,” John smiled.

“Hell, I’ve got to do something around here,” I tried to explain.

“Don’t you just hate false modesty?” Grace asked the group, but directed toward me.

“That’s just him, for better or worse,” Mom supposed.

“For better,” Grace said, snuggling into my arm, as I tried once again to be comfortable with their observations.

Needless to say, we got started a lot later than I’d planned. It was after ten when we got to the airport, we dropped off the car and got a courtesy van to the Marriott. We discussed Grace’s impressions of my family. “The kids were pissed to see you leave,” I said.

“They sure act a lot older than they are,” she replied. “Must get that from their uncle. Anyhow, your mom and Marie told me to take care of you. I guess maybe they think I’m going to replace them.”

“More likely, they’re ready to retire from baby-sitting me, let someone else take the job.”

I was trying to get her to laugh, but I misread her meaning, she wasn’t offended by the thought of my folks turning me over to her. “Can we come back?”

“Sure, fly up anytime you want,” I told her.

Seriously, we decided to spend Thanksgiving with my folks, then Christmas in Atlanta. Turkey day means more in my family, that was the week when I came back home from the hospital.

She then asked if she could come see me in Europe. Of course, I could neither insist on, nor deny her the right to travel, but secretly, I’d been hoping for the day when I could show her off to my friends. Coupled with the impression she made with my folks, I couldn’t have been happier.

“Come over for Italy, after that, we go to Japan and Brasil, that would be a haul.” We ironed it out, she’d fly to London next Monday, she’d see the shop, however much sightseeing she wanted. Then fly to Milan on Thursday morning, see the race weekend, then she back to Atlanta on Monday, me to London. I told her of an FIA bash being thrown at Monza on Thursday night, celebrating the end of the European part of the season.

“You in a tuxedo?” she thought that over. “That means I’ll have to drag out something appropriately sleazy, push my boobies up and out for y’all.”

We stood at the railing in the Delta gate area, watching the airport wake up. Down the concourse, my American had just landed to take me to DFW, a quick meeting with Sola Stella's executives then off to Heathrow. Grace's Mad Dog was being jump-started below us, she was going to make it to Atlanta in time for a three-quarter day at the office. Being Labor Day, she shouldn't be disturbed.

Any more than she was already—"You know the worst part of this? Ninety-nine percent of these people here don't have any concept how bad both of us feel, they aren't leaving their sweetie at the gate and getting on an airplane. At this second, I hate anyone who is feeling ambivalent or happy—I want everyone to feel as miserable as me."

"Trust me, I feel just as lousy as you, and I hope I'll feel as bad thirty years from now." That got her eyes to tearing, I held her as we watched her baggage go up the conveyor.

Too soon, her flight was called. "Well, here goes nothing," she sighed, as I pulled her up from the chair. We kissed for the entire time the agent called off the rows, I could have given a shit who recognized Don Peterson giving some lady a dental exam at seven in the morning in the St. Louis airport.

"See you next Monday," she said, as she pried herself from me.

"That's right," I brightened up somewhat. Won't be long...

"I love you."

"I love you too. Now git, or you'll never leave." She smiled resolutely and headed down the jetway.

As my luggage headed up the belt, her plane roared off the runway and banked right over Bridgeton and Jennings. I wiped a tear away, I suppose I should have worn sunglasses if I was going to be looking into the sun that much.

Bittersweet but centered, I flew to Wien on Thursday, grabbed a car and drove southwest to Zeltweg. Professionally, I was excited, the season was finally escaping the twisty shit and getting back to the fast tracks.

Osterreichring and Silverstone take turns being the fastest circuits in Formula One. Even though the best corner here, Hella Licht, was slowed by a chicane a few years ago, it's still a reasonably good corner, the track is a blast to drive. Up in the mountains, lots of elevation changes, variable weather, though not as bad as Spa. The course is within Ferrari fan driving distance of Italy, so the hills will be full of happy Tifosi along with their banners.

Well, not as happy as they could be. Again, we're back on the fast tracks, Ferrari would just have to watch Jan and me from behind this weekend.

There was incredible news from Spain, just after we'd left the country, plans were announced to bankroll a new circuit in Barcelona. Considering that Jerez was also built with the same donations from the federal treasury, I found it hilarious, while at the same time I was glad I didn't pay taxes in Spain.

The leading European socialists were wringing their hands over this appropriation for an obvious elitist endeavor. While Jan wasn't exactly a leading European socialist, he did have their ear, there were a few unfamiliar journalists around our motor home. I sat facing them, my feet propped up, as Jan held forth.

“Now, I’m a race driver, so I’ve never met a track I didn’t like, but I do have an understanding of governmental responsibility. You don’t go building monuments to opulence and sloth in areas that can’t afford it. Besides, the tracks aren’t that interesting on their own merits. I’ll admit Jerez is handy to test at, it covers all the bases in terms of giving a car a workout, but it’s still a dull track and I don’t imagine Barcelona will be any better.”

I joined in: “In St. Louis, the city wants to build another new stadium to keep a suck-ass professional football team from heading elsewhere. The morons behind the bond issue are wrapping themselves in the flag of ‘civic pride’, but guess who gets a complimentary hospitality suite out of their boosterism?”

“If I were the mayor’s wife, I’d expect to turn on the Six o’clock News and find my husband swinging from a phone pole if he let that pass, and the schools were still crowded and kids had guns.”

“Remember the Shah?” Jan asked. “He started believing his own press agents. Marcos. Somoza, too. Their Swiss bank accounts couldn’t save them when it came time for them to grab their ankles.”

“Sure, we make shitloads of money, but I’m not Eurotrash and Don’s not an Ugly American. I’m sure I know how Don generally spends his salary, he doesn’t go throwing it around and being condescending about it.”

I confirmed that; “Well hell, you can’t take it with you...”

Ferrari had revised front suspensions, so they had closed the gap to us a little bit. Simon made a comment or two wondering what their inspiration for the design was, especially as the speed traps showed them as slow as us through the chicane, the only slow corner on the track. “I’m sure Sanjay appreciates the compliment,” was how Ken put it.

Jan and I were invited to a party our mechanics were throwing Friday night. It was the first organized dinner we’d had in a long time, we all had a blast. I let drop that Grace was going to spend Monza weekend with me, and could they all try and not give her too much shit?

Most of the crew whooped and offered lewd comments, while Simon and Ken sat back thoughtfully.

“I’m not asking what she sees in you specifically,” Ken asked, “But does she see in being with a race driver? God knows Formula One is glamorous and pays well (the mechanics pelted him with dinner rolls), but the job security is nonexistent, and you’re a world away from her for at least nine months a year.”

I knew what he was getting at, this vocation has an honest reputation for being tough on professional and personal relationships. Some would say because the team becomes your family, but in my case, I was fortunate to be with such a group of people.

“First, we’re not married. Yet. Second, she runs around the States as much as I do around Europe, so if we went long-term, we’d be together briefly but intensely. So we’d better be secure in our own lives. Lastly, if anyone can do this, it’s us!”

“‘Went long-term’?” Ken asked incredulously. “I hope you put it a little more romantically than that!”

I wasn’t defensive about the two of us at all, confident that we could make it work, now

that we had a better definition of what we wanted and we were both willing to work for it. Just thinking about her made me feel invincible—I can explain everything, it's all okay.

Along that line of thought, when Jan got pole and the Ferraris pushed me back to fourth, I wasn't freaked. Though I was a little startled as to Ferrari's speed, I was pleased with their ability to develop new things quickly, that bode well for next year.

Over the past few weeks, if Paolo and Manuel were behind us, they acted determined; in front of us, they were bitchy. This weekend, as we were jumbled up, things were relatively calm between them. The four of us actually had breakfast together Sunday morning, Jan and I mostly sat and watched the other two carry on polite conversation. While we didn't talk about Ferrari's lineup for next year, I was happy to see them joking together, it made an already peaceful weekend even better.

Zancana had kindly come over to Simon and offered to coordinate our stops, so the pits wouldn't be so crowded and the crews could work quicker. The warmup found the Ferraris one-two, which startled the hell out of me, and sent Brian and Marcel into a frenzied skull session.

I went down to Ferrari along with Simon, planning on a soft reconnaissance, but we were both amazed by Danilo's openness. "Christ, Simon," he moaned, pulling his sunglasses off as he rubbed his eyes. "Paolo was on RAI last night, Manuel on Austrian television. They announced that all the squabbling they'd been doing was unprofessional, they felt bad about it in retrospect, now they had turned a page. From now on, everything was to be aboveboard, no bullying, full disclosure.

"So, the two of them go to Michelin this morning, asking for qualifying tires for the morning practice. Michelin told them to go to hell—remind me to thank them—but they both talked their race engineers into fitting 'C' compounds. That's how come they went so fast this morning. Oh, by the way, they grenaded their motors, as well."

He motioned into the garage, where their mechanics were whistling while they worked, fitting new turbos. "They had screwed their boost all the way to full rich, probably overrode their rev limiters, too. I'm sure they had fun, but..."

"Manuel should have known better," Jan replied when he heard the news. "What if Paolo suggests that they try running without rear wings?"

But at least they were a team again, publicly they seemed to reconcile themselves to the fact that one of them wouldn't be back next year. I sighed with relief, but a happy pair of Ferraris that were closer to us in performance meant it would be a very long day.

The start was nominal, for about ten laps it stayed Jan-Paolo-Manuel-me. I had passed Manuel at the start, he stuck his nose in at Texaco on the first lap, so I let him have it back. It was still early, and I had decided on a slight wing adjustment before I really stepped on it. Paolo and Manuel then drafted up the hill to Hella Licht, putting Jan down to third.

Time for pit stops, I came in on lap fifteen, Jan on eighteen, the Ferraris in between, just like it was planned. Now this was more like it, I called to Brian, as I gained a half-second a lap. Jan waved me goodbye, then slotted behind me and pushed me up to the Ferraris.

We got past Paolo, who had been passed by Manuel in the pitwork, then he and Jan got in a fight for position, leaving me to deal with Manuel. We went back and forth for a half-

dozen laps, nothing dirty, we left each other lots of room to try whatever maneuvers we thought would work.

Twenty-five laps out of fifty-three, I had a second on Manuel, the biggest lead anyone would have all afternoon long. Less than half the race gone, and there had been too many lead changes to count. With this 'cushion', I took a breath going by the pits. I could imagine Paul and Stephen in the broadcast booth issuing sighs of relief, telling their audience that Don finally had things under control, but don't switch off yet, watch a few more commercials.

It was hotter than hell, I had gone through my bottle of Gatorade already, and I had a feeling, no, a certainty that this wasn't over with yet. Sure enough, on lap thirty, Paolo passed Manuel, they both got by me. Back to third. I drafted them now, I didn't want them to get away. They went through Texaco two-wide, all weekend long they were line astern through the corner. I wasn't expecting this, my front end washed out because of the bad air.

I understeered off into the grass, I managed to keep it from hitting anything substantial, but now I was behind Jan. Ah well, I really wasn't that far behind. I became even more optimistic as I continued, that was fun, and I wanted to get back in contact with someone.

My good humor dissolved as my left front exploded going into the Rindtkurve, sending the car around 720 degrees and almost leaving me high-centered in the gravel.

"Dammitdammitdammit," I radioed as I trickled down the hill. I could imagine the other three leaving me behind, but I couldn't haul ass into the pits because the carcass of the tire would beat the brake ducts and suspension to death. If they hadn't been ruined already on the curb, that is. Fuck.

I was at the pit entrance, I hoped Brian and the guys were ready, though I was sure they had seen the dust cloud, and heard me swearing over the radio. "Give me four 'C's, Brian, if I'm going to cock it up, I'm going to do it big."

"No fucking way, Don," Brian came back. "Your first set of 'B's were down to the cords," (Michelin later said they had wished they had recommended 'A's, for crying out loud).

"Besides," I heard him laugh, "the tires aren't even in the warmers!"

"Doncha worry, I'll get them warm!"

Fifteen people over the wall, Brian took the carcass from around the wheel and threw it across the pit wall as four new 'C's were slapped on. A quick look in the sidepods and brake ducts, then it was time to go. My guys were on the ball, eight seconds compared to our best-ever of 5.9 seconds.

"Thanks for the 'C's, Brian, I love you," I sang as I climbed the hill. "Be sure to give me the gaps to the front." I gave the car a few extra jinks to warm the tires, but literally, I didn't need much help. On my first flying lap, I set fastest lap, reset it the next time around, then I caught a glimpse of my pit board: "L35, P4, -25 PAOLO". Charming. I was fourth, with 53-35= eighteen laps to go, and twenty-five seconds behind third. Making an informed guess, I bet that first was within twenty-six seconds!

Nothing to do but drive my ass off, then. I lowered the lap record five times, getting to within two seconds of my qualifying time. I fell into my old habit of not watching my pit board, apparently I ignored Brian's calls, too. I was off on my own planet, spending a

pleasant eternity acting like the world's quickest nonlinear computer. Passing lapped cars, catching slides, adjusting my fuel mixture, *being* the car. No thoughts of relative success or failure, I wasn't impressing myself as I drove.

It seemed like out of a cloud, but I finally made out another car through the heat waves. Something tripped in my head as I recognized it as one of the Ferraris. A gallon of adrenaline flooded my system: I had *driven* so well, I was in a position to actually go *racing* again!

Paolo wasn't stupid, he was aware of my progress, and wasn't going to pull over and marvel at my driving ability. He had stepped on it himself, getting up to Jan and Manuel. It wasn't like they were in a train, since that implies someone leading and the rest following. We all had our own schedules, but the fact that I had made the scene forced the issue as to who wanted to win the most, the time for pacing was gone.

Lap fifty: Manuel-Jan-Paolo-me, nose-to-tail as we crossed the line, Jan pulled left to slingshot Manuel, by dumb luck I had taken that second to try Paolo. So we were in two rows of two heading up the hill, as we neared the chicane a thought went through my mind: That chicane really isn't meant for two-wide...

Jan's momentum brought him to the outside of Manuel, as they went through Hella Licht they rubbed wheels, but they got through okay. Paolo and I had our wheels intertwined, even more dangerous, but he was cutting the corner hard and I was letting my car drift, so that instant of drama disappeared as we exited the chicane. Paolo and Manuel went after each other a couple more times that lap, while I considered my next move. We crossed the line to close lap 51 Paolo-Manuel-me-Jan.

Climbing the hill this time, I looked to the inside of the Ferraris, getting alongside Manuel. He lost a little air, his car darted right owing to the crowned road. This caused me to hack the wheel even further right, and Paolo, not sure as to what had caused Manuel to move, turned right himself, to keep Manuel in his draft. Jan headed to the outside, had a clear run up to the turn-in. Shit! I thought, this is getting out of hand.

But, as the Ferraris got back in line, it was to my advantage to stay far right, and hope that I'd be far enough ahead that they'd have to lift. Really, I had no choice but to try and take the lead, either that or lock my wheels up and go straight on at the chicane. Man, this was going to be close, I went into the corner too fast and with no room to whoa it down or swing wide on the exit.

I had no time to plan any strategy, I was already turning in. I sensed it wasn't going to work as I felt the front end start to plow while the rear came around.

I was saved from the grass by Jan, who had seen the mess we were getting in coming up the hill, figured fuck this bullshit, went for the outside and waited for the parts to fly. His line meant he was in position for me to bank off his sidepod as I crossed my hands on the wheel trying to keep the car straight. We left donut-shaped tire marks on each other's cars.

Just like in late-models, I grinned later, though at the time I was scrambling my ass off. We went through the next few bends side-by-side. I was sure I had bent something, certain I'd punctured another tire, positive I'd done the same thing to Jan's car. But the thing I cared most about was that my mirrors were full of Ferraris. Finishing up lap 52, Jan-me-Manuel-

Paolo. Considering the intensity of the race we were in the middle of, it would have been ludicrous for Jan to wave me past, team orders or no, because he would wind up in fourth in a heartbeat. Trying to 'drive friendly' in those circumstances sometimes can throw your rhythm off and then you're eating gravel.

Last lap, last drag up to Hella Licht. Though most of the passing had been done here, I thought an instant about staying behind Jan—find some other place to try, somewhere the Ferraris weren't expecting. I immediately rejected that, radical thought or subtle nuance is out of place in a moshpit. The Ferrari men couldn't care less about anything I had planned, they were too busy trying to win. They'd try the same move that had been working to one degree or another all day. This was an instance where the best defense was a blind, reckless offense.

I ducked inside Jan, he sort of expected it, gave me as much room as he could without throwing his race away. It was enough, but Manuel and Paolo attempted to pass Jan, too. Manuel made it, Paolo ran out of room before the chicane and had to duck in behind Jan.

Oh God, I heaved a sigh. My tires were shit, my Ford was tired, this wonderful fucking race had aged me ten years. Now here comes Manuel, planted on my rear wing, with one straight, the Rindtkurve, then a short squirt to the checker.

We were coming up on lapped cars. In retrospect, I was amazed that there had been a quiet period of about five laps while we had diced for the lead, but it was inevitable that we'd come across them sooner or later. Back home, an old trick was to get alongside a slower car and then go two-wide for however long you needed, effectively blocking the track. I'm sorry, but my brain was too tired and wired for such clever thoughts to come out. The only thing in my head was to get to those lapped cars before the Rindtkurve, and box Manuel behind them.

Manuel knew what was going on, too, and he got under my rear wing, tapping me once or twice involuntarily. He was trying to lessen the length of our cars as much as possible, so there would be a greater chance of getting through Rindtkurve together.

I pulled left, Manuel following, and I got alongside the three cars that were fighting amongst themselves. Rindtkurve is a good corner to pass going in to, but is one-groove once you get there. There was no question of us making it through two-wide. I had to get to the apex and chop off the lapped cars in order to leave Manuel behind.

One the last lap of a race, the last thing you expect if you're laps behind is the race leaders blowing past like hell going into a corner. I was hoping they'd kept their eyes open, but I really didn't have a contingency plan if they didn't.

It was a long-ass race, but going into the corner, it dragged. Every nanosecond with its own judgment and decision and reaction and perception and judgment...

It was time to do it. I hoped I'd cleared the traffic, and then cut right. So far, no crash, but still no time to celebrate. Manuel's car had been so close it was making the rear of my car light, giving me oversteer. When I broke his draft, the sudden loading threw me into understeer, so as soon as I had gone in front of the lapped car I was sliding out to the curb. Oh you poor tires...

There wasn't anything brilliant I could do now, brick on the gas pedal and point the car. The boost popoff banged in my ear, I glimpsed Manuel getting around the traffic, I could

hear his engine wind up just after mine. I lost him, I couldn't tell whether he was closing or not. All my consciousness was focused on that finish line that was only about 666 miles away, I aimed the car—and waited, I was a passenger by now.

Waiting...then Brian was yelling and laughing on the radio, when was the last time I'd heard him? The realization that I had won finally hit me as Manuel pulled alongside, giving a thumbs-up, then I threw both hands up and banged my fists on the steering wheel.

I'm not usually that expressive when I'm fortunate enough to win, but, damn, I put a lot into this one. The cool-down lap did nothing to diminish my enthusiasm, I jumped out in the Parc Ferme, running around my car. My car, the one that forgave me for fucking up, responding when I needed help, as dependable as a clock.

Jan came up, he had held Paolo off by five-hundredths, as I got Manuel by thirteen-thousandths. We hugged, then we inspected our matching tire marks as Manuel and Paolo came up. The four of us went up to the podium, even though the top three are the only ones invited, it was *my* race, I wasn't in any mood for argument as to how I wanted to celebrate it. In fact, everyone in authority was wiped out from what they had just witnessed, a feeling of amity was in the air.

The big-screen across the track showed me grinning like an idiot as the Star-Spangled Banner played, then I poured the contents of my champagne bottle down my overalls as the others targeted me with theirs.

Manuel and Paolo waved to the crowd, then took off, Jean-Patrick and Ken joining us on the podium. I was so distracted and giddy that I didn't realize what they were doing there, but then I remembered that our thirteen combined points meant Ken had clinched the Constructors' title. Various journalists had been throwing permutations of the point standings at us all weekend, but I had let them go over my head, focusing on concrete problems. Now the future was now, Ken Hazlett and Ford were World Champions.

Fine, I had won the race and I got a lot of personal satisfaction from that; but the reason I was starting to tear up was because the promise Ken saw in Jan and myself when he trusted his cars to us had been realized. It was more honorable to be a member of his team rather than to be the driver leading the championship.

Bill Moore came up, more hugs, then Bill and Ken posed with the Constructors' trophy as Jan and I stood to one side.

"Man, I'm glad I had something to do with this," Jan said quietly. For my part, I remembered Ken and I bringing sponsors on board together, how he listened on the radio as I screamed every time I heel-and-toed in Brazil during rehab.

How the politicians threatened to take the fun out of our sport. It was slightly hypocritical to see Ken and J-P shaking hands on the podium. If his trophy would have been presented at some banquet, it would have been chillier, I'm sure. But here, after the emotion of the race, getting pissed would have taken too much energy.

A hundred interviews later, I took a shower, then went to call Grace. After trying her house, I found her at her parents'. "Oh my God, Don," she shrieked. I almost expected her to ask me if I'd seen the race! I smiled and grabbed a soda.

"There are about ten people sitting around here with heart attacks," she told me. "I

can't believe you pulled it off!"

"Well, it's nice to know you were so confident," I laughed, we were both loopy.

"Stephen and Paul were wondering what the hell you were doing kicking ass to get to the front when you should have been cruising," she scolded me slightly. I heard her cordless hiss as she moved it, then I heard her breath leave her as she flopped on the bed.

"Well, I could've done just that, but I was confident that I could get to the front, so why should I stay in fourth? It sounds weird, but the car just wouldn't forgive me."

She sighed. "You don't know what it's like, Grace. It didn't matter if I were first, second, or twentieth, there was something left in the car, something left in me. I hadn't used it, and...I needed to, I guess.

"Man, I'm glad it is over, I'm worn out. But Grace, it felt good."

"I'm so proud of you, honey," she gushed. "You know what comes next?"

"You comes next!"

"Thank God."

Italy:

A pair of krypton floodlights dropped out of the stratus clouds hanging over Heathrow. The lights materialized into a Delta A330, and my heart fluttered for the twentieth time in the past hour—the sodas I was chugging reflexively probably didn't help matters.

I had waited in a landside lounge until the last minute, resisting the temptation to pace in front of the windows. I had a good reason, being paranoid about exposing Grace to the European mainstream press.

Of course, she'd been in the background of various press photographs and local TV video on the U.S. side of the pond the week before, but for some reason these hadn't been picked up in the Old World. I was glad of this. Obtrusiveness, wholesale invasion of privacy and plain old fabrication is part and parcel of U.K. journalism. Not so much in the motoring press, they have an unwritten rule that *they* won't look into bedrooms. However, as the summer wore on, there were more of the 'popular' or tabloid writers looking for me, and every racing writer had a drinking buddy at the *Sun* or the *News Of The World*. I didn't want even one reporter mentioning out loud that I was picking up 'some woman' at the airport.

That didn't mean keeping Grace hidden, she had made it clear she wasn't hot on that either. I just wanted to get her settled first, then let it trickle out. Hopefully, we would be in the Monza paddock before any writers caught us necking, by that time we'd be ready for it.

I strode to the security checkpoint, noticing figures moving down the aisle of the aircraft. I looked for Grace, wondered if she were looking for me, laughed when I realized she might not even be on that side of the plane! My pulse was racing just like during the race last weekend; did she feel like this, after three thousand miles of anticipation?

This was perfect, the people coming off were numbed from the crossing, no crowd waiting for arriving passengers. Wearing a white pinstripe jacket and skirt, Grace looked as

bright and fresh as she did leaving for work. Once she saw me, her usual thoughtful expression changed to a wide-eyed smile. She dropped her carry-on and jumped into my arms, as we kissed she lifted a leg behind her. What I needed was back, I could live now rather than just survive.

Once she was done with customs, we drove to the airport Marriott. One hotel I could count on and that would satisfy the one-sixteenth Scotch in me. She was impressed with the place, though understandably she wanted a place to stretch out more than anything.

"Sure, the bed feels better than the plane seat," she admitted, "but I'm not that bad off, why don't you relax next to me, it's nice and roomy?" Haw haw haw.

We acted touristy Tuesday morning, successfully putting off seeing my apartment until that evening. While there are better rentals in town, I never saw the need for extravagance, since I was hardly there anyhow.

I liked the fact that everything was within arms' reach, but cozy was one thing, cramped another, and it had been a long time since I had entertained people other than from the team.

"Don't hold the appearance against me," I cautioned as I unlocked the door, sniffing for the refrigerator having gone out in my absence.

Really, the place was just fine, Grace found it charming, an adjective I hadn't used in this context before.

The tour took three minutes, Grace remarked on how clean it was, "Like you had someone come in," was how she put it.

"Nope, just me," I replied. "I spent the time between arriving from Missouri and leaving for Austria tearing it apart. It really didn't take that long, but I was so paranoid, I did it twice." She squeezed my hand. "Washed the curtains, descaled the shower head, bought new sheets."

"All for little ol' me?"

"Nah, it needed it," I lied, she turned my face to hers and kissed me.

We spent the next morning wrapped up in those new sheets, alternately necking and watching English television. She had gotten used to the new accents and colloquialisms quickly, and of course there was the deal with right-hand drive cars. "But the phones, the electrical outlets, this is weird, Don."

"No malls, you have to actually hunt for a Pizza Hut or McDonald's; didn't you just shit when you came over?"

"I did turn vegetarian for a time until I could find something palatable," I shrugged. "But I came over here expecting to be overwhelmed; plan for the worst, hope for the best, blah, blah."

"Besides, you take someone from East St. Louis and haul him out to St. Peters, he'd shit, too. I don't want to get political, but that might as well be another country."

"You do what you do, I suppose," Grace concluded, looking out my balcony and surveying the city. Her robe was opened by the passing breeze, she made no effort to close it. It was a beautiful day in many ways, sunlight outlined her body, causing me to get off the couch and join her at the railing. Six stories above town, and she still hadn't drawn

attention.

“What took you so long?” she laughed in a whisper. We held hands as I pointed out Ken’s shop among other things. I may have thought my flat plain, but her being there was all the decoration it needed.

“I’m so glad you came to me,” I told her, kissing her cheek, she raised her shoulder to squeeze me.

Ken’s works were next on our itinerary, by the time of our visit on Wednesday, the place was deserted save for Sanjay and the shop staff.

There were no complete cars left to look at, a couple of monocoques were being finished ‘just in case’. The pace of the fabrication work was winding down, reflecting our depth into the season. In a storage area were the remains of the car I’d flipped in Jerez. The motor was long gone back to Moore’s, and the bodywork had been spirited away by Portuguese race fans, leaving a tub, radiators and bits of the suspensions.

“God, this isn’t much bigger than you are,” she remarked. “I’m used to seeing you race on television, I guess there’s not anything to compare the size to, unlike now.”

“Yeah, when we were at Talladega, I thought the same thing about stock cars, and I used to race something close to them,” I agreed.

“And you go 200 in this?” she asked rhetorically.

“Not this one, anymore,” I smirked.

“I’ve watched you get in the cockpit on television,” she changed the subject, “squeezing your legs together, slipping your shoulders and putting your arms in whatever space is left. Damn, I think that would be like working in a coffee kiosk, I’d get claustrophobia.”

“You do something for seven years or so and I guess you get used to it.” I was amazed by the depth of the observations she made. Honestly, I did feel cramped the first time I sat in the Atlantic car at Long Beach, but I hadn’t remembered that in years.

“Shit, I’m probably going to obsess on that, now that you’ve mentioned it,” I grumbled at her, smiling.

Early Thursday morning, we went Heathrow-Milano on Alitalia. Hertz was out of Fords, so we got a Fiat and headed toward my hotel in Como. It made a slight bit of sense to have the Fiat this weekend, now that I was soon to be a Ferrari driver. It wasn’t that bad of a car, good enough for 150 KPH, fast enough to keep up on the autostrada, though more people passed me than the other way around.

We had lunch with Jan. Despite Grace and Jan having nothing in common besides, well...*me*, they got along. Jan and I might be in the middle of a riot this weekend, but he treated Grace like he was lucky to meet her, his driving could wait.

Ken and Simon came over, Grace was overwhelmed by Ken’s generosity and effusive compliments. Ken congratulated me on my good taste, although he questioned her choice in boyfriends!

“Well, he’s more refined than your average hayseed,” she allowed, “I thought he’d appreciate a classy lady for a change.”

I had heard this line of chatter before, so I studied Ken and Simon for their reaction.

“Hayseed?” Simon repeated, placing the word. “Never heard Don labeled that.”

“Now hick, hillbilly, we call him that all the time!” Ken replied. Grace roared, I just smiled.

“We brought four cars?” I asked, knowing the answer. “I figure I can wreck three of them in about an hour, y’assholes.”

Late in the afternoon, we drove to the circuit, with Grace looking at scenery I had seen for the past few years. She asked me where I was going to live, since I was changing teams.

“Well, I could stay in London or Monte Carlo and no one would think twice, but I don’t know,” I thought out loud. “I think Fiat has someone looking for a place for me, they’ll probably recommend some huge villa that we’ll bounce around in.” She squeezed my hand at that.

“When I came to Hazlett’s,” I continued, “I moved into the flat, then I asked Ken and Simon to get me an office at the shop. They looked at me funny, their other drivers only showed up at the works once a year, if that often.”

“So, why did you decide on London?”

“So the mechanics knew I was one of them, too. I don’t have to be arrogant just because I’m the most visible member.”

Paolo lives in Roma, he’s a cosmopolitan kind of guy. Manuel has a house in Monte Carlo, but there is no way I could ever live there.

“Why is that, because of him?” she arched an eyebrow.

“No, not at all. We get along, and I’m in love with their daughter.” She squeezed tighter. “But Monaco is like living in Beverly Hills. I don’t want to sound like I’m a stick in the mud, everyone needs to get their ya-yas out from time to time. But a town like Monte Carlo, Kona...shit, Branson for that matter—nothing decent gets done. The inhabitants traffick in insignificant things at best, illegal things at worst. I don’t want to be surrounded by that type of people, it’s just not my style. Just because Manuel lives there doesn’t change anything.”

We were approaching the track. Monza is in the middle of a municipal park, so it’s not readily apparent you are coming upon a racecourse, unlike Indianapolis or Daytona. But it is a beautiful setting, thousands of trees surrounding the track, contrasted with downtown Houston concrete.

For the rest of the weekend, we’d be going in and out via helicopter, but today it was fairly easy to get to the paddock. The Tifosi that were on the scene took note of my Fiat and showed their appreciation by surrounding my car and chanting my name happily. Grace’s jaw actually dropped, slightly in awe of the throng. This was nothing compared to what would happen if a Ferrari won on Sunday, ignoring for a second the likelihood of that.

We spotted a couple of banners with me in a Ferrari with “1” on the nose. “Wishful thinking,” I thought out loud.

“You’re hesitant to acknowledge that you’re going to do it,” Grace said. “I can’t jinx you, no one can but yourself, Don, it’s going to happen. I know you think about it.”

“A bird in the hand, you know.” But that sounded like a flippant answer, so I tried again. “I spent some time imagining how I’d act if I made it to the top. First, the argument

can be made that I'm already there, in terms of salary. And if the yardstick is my ranking in the Autocourse yearbook, I was Number One ahead of Manuel last year." That was a slight upset to everyone *except* Manuel, he'd been ranked first five times. "My folks told me to be modest, let my accomplishments speak for themselves. Second, anything could still happen—I saw a guy lose a seventeen-point lead after Silverstone. I have to concentrate and work hard, even now. Third, I really just want to win races, the points come along with them.

"Last," I turned to her, "when it happens, I assure you I'll go nuts."

Simon came up to us in the paddock, Grace's laminates were ready, I clipped them to her blouse. One for the FIA, another for Hazlett's area. The same photo for both, (from her studio, of course, bare shoulders, vaseline lens!), with her name plainly printed on them. *That* would be enough for the papers to begin on the gossip, fibs and fabrications to appear in the Friday editions.

In the garage, the mechanics were working on our cars already, which was unusual, but I was preoccupied with showing Grace off. Brian presented her with a pair of headphones, so she could hear our conversations for better or worse. She also received a team windbreaker, though it was unlikely she'd need it.

"So when are you going to drive me around?" Grace wondered, ready to embarrass me now that I was amid my friends and co-workers. In response, I was going to suggest that Brian bolt her to one of the sidepods. Before I could, Marcel wondered aloud what the hottest two-seater in the paddock was, that got us to looking around. There was a Porsche 928S that was sitting in the car park near our own autos.

"Wonder whose that is?" I ventured. It was a pretty car, the nicest of the Porsches, aside from the 917's, of course.

"It's my girlfriend's," Jan announced, hugging Grace and introducing his friend, a too-skinny, too-tan, too-blonde. She was friendly toward Grace, and not overly impressed by my name, which I liked.

"Mind if Don borrows your VW?" Jan asked her, she laughed a great laugh and threw me a key.

"Okay, okay," I relented, people were getting their jollies out of my predicament. "But first, show me the shift pattern, it would really look good if I wanted third, got first and buzzed your motor." Brian brought my helmet out as Jan's friend leaned in the passenger window to explain things. After that, I went out for a reconnaissance lap, to get a feel for the grip and brakes. Actually, I did two, only then did I feel ready.

As I belted Grace in the passenger seat, she asked me "Are you going to scare me shitless?"

"Nah, just get your blood to going a little," I replied evenly. She matched her expression to mine, then she smiled quickly and spoke out the window to the group:

"He is going to scare me shitless!" Chuckles drifted behind us as the Porsche crawled away.

The first Variante chicane was like a Walmart parking lot upon accelerating out of the pits. I told Grace, "Sorry, it'll be better next time."

"Yeah, and go fuck yourself while you're at it."

This wasn't like Talladega, where you relax, stomp the gas and try not to do anything stupid, Monza requires more proactive behavior. Leaving the main straight, heading out toward the two Lesmo corners, I had a surprise for Grace. I downshifted to third, just as Grace was muttering, "Brakes, how about now...Don!" I tapped the middle pedal. Tomorrow in the Hazlett, I'd not even think about the brakes until around the 100-meter sign, but now I was at 300 and on the binders. I didn't want to have my picture all over Europe tomorrow morning upside down in a gravel trap in someone else's car! Grace seemed to relax upon my move, then she hit the roof as I gassed it again, tires squealing, a full-power slide through the first Lesmo. Totally under control, about six-tenths is all, though you couldn't tell by Grace.

So far, so good, though the armrest had nail marks in it by now, and Lesmo 2 coming up. "I'm sorry, did I scare you?" I said to Grace in an aside, she would have punched me save for her self-preservation instincts!

I could almost hear her thinking, "Another righthander, Don, are you even going to let off the gas?", as the second part of the bend came up. No, I wasn't getting off the throttle, tires hopping as the car slid all the way to the left-hand curb.

"God-fucking-dammit," she screamed, as she tried to push her feet through the firewall. That was fine, any sudden change in the car's center of gravity at the time would have been disturbing, to be charitable.

It wasn't 'til the Variante Ascari that I could hear her take a breath. The cockpit was full of tire smoke, even though the air conditioning was on. As I exited the Parabolica, I aimed for the pits, illogically flicking the turn signal! Even more irrationally, Grace protested, asking "Please, just one more lap? This is like a really good roller coaster!" She asked for it, I decided, through Lesmo the second time, she actually gave out a yee-haw.

Four laps, then into the pits. Grace fell out of her door laughing her ass off, whether she was relieved or not I'd leave for later. I spotted Brian twirling a stopwatch with a smirk on his face, I stared too long, Grace caught my eyes and spied the watch.

"How fast," I sighed.

"One-twenty," Brian replied.

"Ha! Beat you," the car's owner chortled. "Did 122 last year."

"Big deal! It was at least twenty degrees cooler last year," I smirked, arguing slightly.

"Man, that was better than sex," Grace reported, the eyes of the crowd fell on me, I responded by lightly tapping my head on the roof of the car.

Soon thereafter, it was back to Como, where we discussed the sex versus racing dichotomy for an hour or so, then she kicked me out of the bathroom. She had brought over two suitcases, she wouldn't let me look in the one or even let me carry it. Now as I heard her singing from the large bathroom of our suite, I repaired to the balcony, leisurely knotting my tie and slipping my oxfords on as I sipped from a bottle of water.

Como is a useful distance from the track, most of the full-blown Tifosi stay in campgrounds at the track this weekend, or else sleep in caravans parked on the access roads of the park. So, while there are race fans here, there's none of the rioting and mass burglary found closer to the track. The well-dressed crowd below might well be a convention of dentists for all I knew, or was able to ascertain.

However, some fans recognized the figure looking over the third-floor balcony. Soon, there were about twenty people hailing me in Italian, asking about my wrist, how I felt about my imminent move to Ferrari, who I'd like as second driver. Votes for Manuel and Paolo were evenly split, Jan got a vote or two from members of the fringe, who were quickly taken away and beaten.

As the sun went behind the mountains, I noted the light in the bath flick off. I took that as a sign to get going, I bade my farewells to the fans below. I turned toward the door, to be met by Grace, arms out to her sides, awaiting my verdict.

"Kee-rist," I muttered. She was in a black chiffon dress, spaghetti straps, cut down *past* there, some sort of support mechanism I couldn't figure out because the back was cut the same depth, glitter makeup on her chest.

"Are you dressing how you feel again?" I asked her in an appreciative tone.

"Actually, I feel a little nervous," she replied, looking down at her cleavage.

"Don't. God made ya," I told her. The dress also showed a generous amount of her beautiful thighs, also revealing six-inch heels. Better her than me, I have the utmost respect for any lady who puts up with wearing them, if only for a couple hours.

"Oh, shit," she whispered.

"What?" I smiled, I couldn't see anything wrong. She then motioned me to the doorway, stood next to me, now she was almost a foot taller! The look on her face told me she would gladly chop off the heels, but I could give a rat's.

She bent her neck down to kiss me. A chorus of cheers and whistles from the boulevard meant the crowd hadn't dispersed after all, we went out to the railing. I felt like a rap singer or something, as the crowd seemed to like how my girlfriend looked, too. Grace bent over double laughing, the audience suddenly went silent, as they got a better look at her than anyone had imagined! She straightened up immediately, but her face was as red as I'd ever seen it.

I smiled as a comment in Italian caught my ear. Both me and the others down below laughed, Grace wanted to know what was said.

"He simply made the observation that not too many women could do justice to that dress," I paraphrased slightly.

"Right," she looked at me sideways. I then told her a response in Italian, to my delight she actually came close to the proper inflection and pace. The group laughed again.

"Okay, how much of a fool did I make of myself?" she sighed.

"You told them you can't be bought, but you can be rented," I replied. "It loses a little in the translation."

"So will you, Don," she replied. "So will you." And then she bent over again. She could have run for mayor of Como.

Dinner was little more than appetizers and that was fine with me. Although each team had their own table, no one tied themselves to their seats. I introduced Grace to at least one hundred people. Like I expected, she was neither over- nor under-dressed. Therefore, she relied on her personality to get attention, successfully, too. She finally got to meet Paolo and Manuel, although they were in-and-out and the Ferrari table looked a little lonely.

Paolo was effusive in his appreciation of Grace, having a hard time keeping his eyes off of her. Since I had the same problem, and Grace was receptive, I didn't mind. Grace related the phrase she had been directed to shout off the balcony, Paolo turned to me wide-eyed, amazed I would suggest such a thing.

"It's an honor to meet you, Grace, and my regrets as to your choice in boyfriends!" He kissed her hand.

"See you in the fence tomorrow," I promised, as he disappeared laughing into the night. Like most drivers, he was leaving early to get ready for tomorrow, that's why I was slightly startled to see Manuel arrive about nine-thirty, I thought we'd missed him.

He asked Grace what she'd had thought of Europe so far, told her his impressions of America ("I've seen downtown Houston and Detroit, so I haven't seen America yet"), and spent ten minutes refuting my statement that it was impossible to lead a normal family life in Monaco.

"I'm just there for the taxes, we're mostly hermits," he explained. That was true, I'd been to his house maybe three times in the years I've known him, the last time during the Grand Prix this spring. He was showing off his baby more than allowing me to enter his sanctum.

"Marlena is cutting her first molars," he related, as Grace and I clucked in sympathy. "She's miserable, usually when she hears me on the phone she'll perk up, but not this time." We could tell he really wanted to be back home to console her, but naturally he couldn't. He wandered off, leaving Grace and me to reflect.

"I like to think that I know what is important," I began, "but Manuel seems to love Ferrari to the point of obsession. If his kid's in that much pain, fly in here tomorrow morning. Monaco isn't that far away."

"He's afraid of missing something," Grace thought. "If Paolo is here..."

"Insecurity?" I rolled that around. "Maybe this 'full disclosure' between the two of them isn't exactly the truth. They are marketing themselves to Zancana and the rest of the Ferrari management, the one who appears to be the most accommodating and approachable might have an edge.

"And make no mistake about it, Ferrari will decide this weekend. Home crowd, everybody pumped up. If Manuel missed an interview, it might not give the right impression."

"Who do you want?"

I began to give her the standard response about being an employee, but she cut me off. "Assume you own the team, it's Christmas, and you can break your toys if you want."

"Being totally objective? Manuel, by a wide margin. Paolo has tons of talent, raw speed, but Manuel has gone past that. The only weakness he has really isn't his; my car is better. All things equal, he can drive my ass off, and I don't feel insecure about admitting that."

"Let's leave that alone for a second," Grace replied, "But then why doesn't Ferrari see this your way? They might be over-emotional, but they can't be stupid."

"I have no idea," I confessed. "Other than generating a lot more publicity than they

were going to get just running around three-four behind us all summer. If I were Paolo, I'd be wondering who my benefactor was, he should have been long gone. Rich, but gone."

One of Ken's friends had an Augusta helicopter that brought us to the track on Friday morning. Grace was amazed at the lines of cars that had formed on the roads leading into the park.

"Sort of like Georgia-Florida weekend," she remarked.

We went into the motorhome so I could prepare for practice. Jan was already there, shouting a hello over his door as Grace and I filed back. First on were triple-layer Nomex underpants, socks tucked into the legs of the longjohns. Then a long-sleeve shirt, attached to the pants with special fire-resistant Velcro. I slipped my overalls on far enough to put my shoes on, outwardly they appear to be regular athletic shoes, but these are fire-resistant, too. High-tops since the accident. Once they were laced, I stood up and Grace helped pull my overalls up. When SSC came on board, we got in a friendly argument about the color of the overalls. They wanted black as the primary color, but they weren't sitting in the car getting baked on a sunny day. I offered gray with black highlights, and they went for it.

Almost ready, I grabbed my helmet and stuffed my gloves and firesock into it. No sunglasses, though. Even though it was a cloudless morning, I feel it important for the public/sponsors/media to be able to look me in the eyes. My eyeglasses were UV-protected anyhow, that was good enough. I used to go overboard on this, holding my eyelids open in an exaggerated manner when I thought there were cameras about, until I heard a comment or two about how it appeared I was on speed!

Jan met us up front when we were done, apparently he and his girlfriend felt one way or the other about her being at the track, he was alone as we walked to the pits.

Now the press was on us, shutters and photographers tripping as we moved on our way. Jan and I had our 'game faces' on, friendly answers to questions, but more preconceived and shallow that they'd be after the weekend.

There was a new twist, as Brian showed us a slightly updated front suspension on my spare car. "Sanjay was doing stress analysis on the bits we pulled from Jerez," he began. "Even though it was material fatigue, he got to looking at the design, there was an area that he was concerned about." He didn't bother pointing to the specific location, if Sanjay was on it, that didn't matter. But I did notice the suspension was made of carbon fiber, black instead of the polished aluminum on the regular cars, indeed on the rear of this one. Again, that was no problem—you go into racing trusting a number of people, obviously you can't verify the performance of every part yourself. Sanjay obviously doesn't want to send me into the barrier, since it impacts on his reputation, checkbook, and conscience. Reason enough to place my faith in him and the people who bolt my car together.

"Anyhow," Brian continued, "Sanjay says this'll be a mite stronger, for what it's worth, but he also thinks it will cure your turn-in problems in the slow corners. I can't see any reason why he'd be wrong, but I thought we'd put it on your spare. If it doesn't work, there's always the primary." We both shrugged our shoulders in unison, it was worth looking into...

Bill Moore had another surprise for us, in the form of a new engine chip he held in his

hand. "With this puppy, you'll think you've got a V-12 behind you," he laughed, sitting on the counter with a satisfied expression.

I fingered the plastic bubble-wrap of the chip. Both the suspension and the chip were in the pipeline before we clinched the constructors' title, but they could have been just as easily forgotten about once that was done. But both Hazlett and Ford were still spending money to keep us up front, when the old stuff was still doing the job. Also, there was a lot of next year's technology on the cars for everyone, including the competition, to see.

Next year, *I* would be the competition, I could hardly forget all I knew when it came time for discussions with my new engineers over the winter.

I looked over at Ken on the pit wall, he was smiling at me as if to say "So what, next year is next year, get out there and kick ass." My guys were giving me all the tools to actually race, rather than cruise for points. What I had to do to show my appreciation was use the car, not baby it, not putt around, and finally, not screw up.

That's as good as done, I thought, as I kissed Grace and put my firesock on. I overlapped the material of the overalls and sock, then did the same with the gloves and sleeves. Helmet on, I motioned to Brian to start the car, waited for the temps and pressures to come up, and then it was time to go.

Coming out of the pits, I could already feel a little improvement in the feel of the car. As important as any real gain in performance is, more significant is the ability of the car to transmit that information to the driver, then I have more to go on. The more consistent and honest the car is in the way it 'talks', then the more confident I am with it, and the faster I can go.

I was up to speed by Ascari chicane, the car turned in and gripped like a gum eraser on a tabletop. I would have opened my mouth in amazement, but the G-forces would have dislocated my jaw! The car was perfect through the fast Parabolica, too, and I gave a whoop over the radio as I passed the first time. I did three laps, taking the chicanes in different lines, with no loss in grip.

Jan came by on my next set of tires and we drove in formation for three more laps. The advantage in my new suspension was evident as I was able to lose him in the chicanes, but then his computer chip enabled him to pull back to me down the straights.

We both filed in, practice was just about over for the morning, but I had already found out what I needed to:

"Give me his engine!" I yelled, pointing at the back of Jan's car; misleading, as the black box was in the sidepod. Jan, in turn replied, "Give me his chassis!"

We sat on the wall for a short discussion, as the Ferraris thrashed around to catch us. Simon confirmed there were enough bits for both front ends, Jan sat back, happy. Bill's guys were already at the cars, fiddling around in the electronics.

I had this thought flitting around the back of my mind that we should be staying out of trouble and getting a race setup pinned down. What happens if we get everything converted, we guess wrong and it rains tomorrow? We'd be lucky to get on the thirteenth row of the grid!

But, everyone was raring to go to work, and it wasn't like they'd have to build two cars

from the tub up. The suspension was bolt-on, the electronics plugged in and out.

So much for my reservations, I thought. If everyone else at least tacitly wanted to try the mods, then who was the driver to stand in the way? Jan certainly had no problem, his dislike for Ferrari giving him every reason to try and put another tenth on them.

For first-round qualifying, we took our old chassis-engine specifications and qualified three-tenths ahead of the Ferraris. I got caught behind some traffic, so Jan got me for the provisional pole by seven-hundredths. Ferrari had brought *six* race-ready cars in order to try and catch us, Paolo and Manuel were car-hopping like the valets at the hotel.

I was slightly disappointed not to get provisional pole, but there was Saturday left, and we were in good shape. Qualifying wasn't hard in the respect that we had to use up the cars, rather it was fatigue from a solid hour of five laps out, five minutes in the pits, then back out. Always calculating, determining, and relating to our engineers what the cars were doing. In some aspects, the race is easier because you live with what you have for the most part, with only your on-board levers and knobs and at most two stops in the pits. Regardless, I was glad to get out of the car and shut that part of my brain off.

And there was Grace, sitting on the same director's chair I'd last seen her in a couple of hours before. I'd made a number of stops, she'd heard me talking with Brian and Simon, but I had totally ignored her, even though she was less than five feet from the pit stall. While in the car I was focused, but now I felt a little guilty about having neglected her. She wouldn't hear of it, kissing my sweaty face and announcing to the assembled crew that "We'll be in the shower in case anyone needs us!"

Saturday, we were greeted in the pits by a red-eyed but smiling Brian, who showed the refitted primary cars with a grand sweep of his hand. Bill was talking to the onboard computers with his laptop, stroking his stubble.

"You guys get any sleep?" I asked, genuinely concerned. "Yeah," Brian rubbed his temples. "We took a nap while we were bolting the suspensions, I think."

For morning practice, I'd work on a full fuel load, while Jan tried a qualifying setup. After half an hour, we'd change cars, compare notes, and run the rest of the session. Then we would tweak the cars for qualifying during the break.

If yesterday was nerve-wracking, double it for today. We had only about two hours of track time to get this gamble to pay off. If we were still chasing the chassis at the end, all of the warmup on Sunday morning wasn't going to help.

Again, I was doing long-distance runs, so Jan had made three stops for new tires and splashes of fuel before I had come in once. Brian and Marcel both plugged in, we discussed what Jan had found as well as my impressions. I hadn't purposely concentrated on setting a fast time, but Marcel let drop that Jan had gone seven-tenths better than his pole time, that got me excited.

"Well, no sense in me pounding around in race trim," I shrugged, getting out and sitting on the pit wall for Jan to come in so we could switch.

I glanced down to Ferrari, no cars in the pit lane, both Paolo and Manuel droning around, doing far more laps than we were. I turned a monitor toward me, scanned the times. We were still comfortably ahead, but the Ferraris were within one-tenth of each other,

making small gains but nothing major. My crew guessed that their gains were a result of more rubber being laid down, rather than from any breakthrough in race engineering. I chuckled—their crew barely had time to refuel and change tires, let alone make reasoned analyses of the changes they were making.

Brian mentioned quietly, “Don, if they come up on you, head for the gravel and ask questions later. They’re the only two cars on the road, as far as they’re concerned.”

I nodded absent-mindedly; no matter where they qualified, this was certainly more gripping than watching us kick their asses.

The morning papers reported that Paolo and Manuel were being forthcoming with each other, sharing info on where their cars worked and where they didn’t. The more intelligent of the writers had the view that the two of them had their fingers crossed behind their backs during their debriefs.

Or maybe they weren’t lying so much as mind-fucking each other, if Paolo went out on qualifying tires, Manuel would immediately ask for race compound and stay out for ten laps. Similarly, if Manuel had his car set for high-downforce/high-drag, then Paolo would trim his car out for maximum speed and rely on his car control to get him around the corners.

While Jan and I did the same thing, sort of, we worked on only one variable at a time. I don’t think there was one setting on the Ferraris that hadn’t been adjusted at least once during the weekend. Our approach gained us nearly a second, while theirs...

There was a pseudo press conference up at Ferrari’s during the lunch break, it was piped throughout the paddock. They said the all the right things, stuff like “everyone is working flat-out to close the gap to the Hazletts,” but their engineers were strolling the pit lane as they spoke, the mechanics stared blankly into space as they ate. No one, except Manuel and Paolo, was talking a lot, and the two of them filled up a lot of tape without saying much.

“To hear the announcers talk, you’d think Ferrari has you guys where they want you,” Grace motioned toward their pit. “They must be looking off different time sheets than the rest of us.”

“Well, even if I get pole and kick their butts Sunday, they’ll read that as another example of Ferrari’s brilliance in selecting talent, that just isn’t a problem. If they happen to win tomorrow, then they’ll just wet their pants with more justification.” I gave a small smile.

“But that’s not going to happen,” Grace prompted, trying to get a response, but I just squeezed her hand.

A bank of clouds arrived over the track, providing a break from the heat, and also changing the conditions we’d set up for. Rather than the last minutes of qualifying being ‘happy hour’, it now appeared that conditions could change as quickly as a shadow would take to cross the park.

As everyone in the paddock silently gravitated back to the pits, I began to lower my metabolism again. I might have conditions for only one banzai lap, or I might have to run like my ass was on fire for twenty. I could do a ‘perfect lap’ five minutes in, then Jan could pull a ‘more perfect’ one out and I’d have to start over. It’s no wonder I usually stay in the car for the whole hour; I get withdrawn, talk in short bursts. The confinement of the cockpit

actually feels reassuring.

The popular picture of a Formula One driver sitting sullenly under an umbrella gives the impression that we're detached, antisocial. What we're doing is preparing to go fast, that has very little to do with waiting for a cloud or traffic to lighten up. It's different from the race, where you can plan strategy; in qualifying, you have to drive the lap before you start the engine. The car has to be perfect, and mine always is, I have to be ready to capitalize on it *now*.

I looked up after a moment, nodded to Brian. The crew removed the blowers from the radiator inlets, fired the engine, Brian waved me out.

From yesterday, Jan was on pole, and he took off another half-second on his first set of qualifiers. Then I went out and lopped another half off my own Friday time, putting us almost two seconds ahead of the rest of the field. Jan went out on his second set and could do no better, indeed he surprised everyone by getting out, telling Marcel that he had nothing left.

I was out on my second set when this happened, naturally I had no idea how he felt. I was shocked to see him lean into my cockpit as I pitted, after I got within a tenth of his time.

We discussed his decision, as I tried to think my way toward that missing tenth. He wasn't being arrogant or throwing down a gauntlet by announcing he was done, rather he was convinced that I could find a little more, and he wanted to be in on the solution.

"Don, where are you having trouble?" Brian probed. He had asked the same question after my first set, a way of getting me to talk, not implying that I couldn't figure out the car. If he really wanted to know, he could have looked at the telemetry, which showed Jan getting out of the Lesmos and Parabolica faster than I. Since those corners led to the longest straights, that head start of his carried a long way.

But we looked at that later; in the pit, I replied, "The car's a little too tight leaving the corners, I think if I could drift it out more, I'd find something."

Exiting the chicanes, and on the relatively shorter straights leaving them, our charts were a wash, if anything, I was a little faster. Jan admitted he was having to get out of the gas slightly on the exits, his car wanted to keep turning even after leaving the chicanes. But aside from that, Jan mentioned, he couldn't see anything wrong. Sounded like power oversteer, I lived with that every day back on dirt.

"What the fuck, Don," Jan wondered, "why don't you try my car?" Brian arched his eyebrows, then nodded his head. Sure, I could do that. Sometimes one chassis, by every measure equal to another, is slightly faster.

I thought for a minute, but just one; we were on a deadline. Jan's car had oversteer, tires couldn't fix it. His read on it was that it could take the rest of the session to dial it out—maybe—and he wasn't of the opinion that he wanted to try.

Marcel baited me: "It's just enough to notice, you'd probably not feel it." Okay, you asked for it, I thought, punching my belt release. Within three minutes, my seat was fitted, my number was put on Jan's car. As gas was put in and four Q-tires were hammered on, I scanned the sky. I noticed the clouds begin to thin; within ten minutes we'd be back to full sun, the track would become slicker and slower.

I collapsed the umbrella, the starter whirred.

Yeah, this is better, I thought, leaving the first chicane and kicking the rear out, the car arced to the curb. My own car was close, but Jan's car knew exactly what I was thinking. I was aware that I was getting on the gas quicker and harder than before.

Having that response show up quantitatively was another thing—in the move to Jan's car, we had foregone the radio connections, so I wasn't able to be paced along. It really didn't matter, though. Like Jan, if this run wasn't good enough, too darn bad. I was already exploring as many reaches of my psyche as I wanted to, I was driving with the knowledge that this was it.

The first lap was perfect, the second even more so, but it was hard for me to tell exactly how much better. Banking off the curbs, just an inch away from being launched over them. With a great sense of exhaustion and relief, I coasted in after three laps.

There was sporadic applause as I drove down the pits, it got louder as I got closer to ours. Jan leaned in to shake my hand, Brian and Grace came over to help me out of the car. Judging by my response, I figured I nipped Jan, but Brian pointed to the monitor and I had gotten pole—by seven-tenths!

I shook my head, not able to grasp the concept of what I had done. I was in awe of the accomplishment, and not just because I had done it. Seven-tenths, all at once?

The sun came out, as well as a nice breeze blowing up the straight, so that was it for fast times. Photographers massed around me, at least I didn't have to worry about exhibiting a smug image. "Christ, some day I'm going to have to look at the tape," I muttered.

True to my word, I went back to the motorhome and changed clothes. Our work done, the team and I watched the last half-hour from various vantage points.

I had done fifteen laps on the day, Jan ten, but Manuel was up to thirty, Paolo twenty-seven. Their activities had no correlation with ours; when I was out on the track in the shade, Manuel wasn't even out, and Paolo was out doing a ten-lap run on race tires.

Stephen from NBC mentioned that it appeared they were arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, I couldn't put it better than that. They were more than two seconds behind us, and fighting like hell for every thousandth. Paolo and Manuel swapped third and fourth three times in the last five minutes, Paolo blowing his engine impressively in front of the pits, and Manuel's motor just plain stopped as the checker fell. "Nice lap," they remarked to me, walking up the pit lane.

There was the polewinner's press conference to go to, and I dragged Jan along. I was laughing giddily, mostly from the lack of will I had to move or exert myself. Jan arrived stripped to the waist, his overalls tied in front of him. We were both in a good mood, throwing ice cubes at one another and at the journalists.

The media were effusive in their compliments, saluting my 'brilliant' lap.

"Yeah, I knew it would be a brilliant one," I laughed.

"Don surprised me," Jan added. "I thought it would be an inspired one, possibly a monumental one, but not brilliant."

While he talked, I kept my eye on a housefly buzzing around. I made an effort to snag it, then quickly brought my hand to my mouth. I rolled my eyes in an exaggerated manner,

chewing as the writers laughed. Jan looked over his glasses at me, I returned his look and said, “kiss me!”

Some schmuck brought up the latest championship standings update (hadn’t changed since Austria). Each guy thinks he’s the only one to distill the various permutations of the standings, like they’re all Einstein working on the Grand Unified Theory. “Don, do you realize that you only need one more point than Manuel to clinch the title, no matter what he does?”

“Well, no,” I replied in an awed voice. “It hadn’t crossed my mind.” I kept a straight face, listening to the laughter build before allowing a smile.

“Look, if I win, the points will be there.”

“So, just another race tomorrow?” That was from Stephen. If I didn’t know him, I might think his smirk to be one of disdain, but I accepted it as my own thought, acting in a self-depreciating manner.

“I guarantee you I won’t give the points a thought this evening. I will sleep well tonight, then I’ll get in the car and drive like hell tomorrow. My run today would have meant the same to me personally if I had done it anywhere else.”

I focused on the opposite wall, thought a second. “It’s not like I’m disrespectful of the title ‘World Champion’ and all it represents and doesn’t. Lord knows I’ve tried to pay homage to the classy people in the sport, past and present. And, I’ve tried to look on my involvement in Formula One as a sporting endeavor, despite the money and the notoriety.”

I was studying the plastic bottle cap from my water, I hoped I wasn’t mumbling. Jan butted in, “Ask a simple question...” I smiled, looked up.

“My goals have always been to work my ass off and to see something positive come of it. Winning championships are such a subjective measurement, that you can’t really make that a goal. If I did it, that would be great, but not any better than winning Austria, or Belgium or Houston. Or any better than shooting the shit with my buddies in the press.” That got the biggest laugh of all.

One of Lacroix’s toadies, a known troublemaker, asked Jan a question: “Jan, was it team orders for Don to get in your car and get the pole?”

I looked over at Jan, I was sure his response would be better than mine could have been. It was, but it wasn’t the rebuttal I had expected.

“No, it wasn’t anyone’s decision but mine,” he replied evenly. “It was not a decision, but really an observation. It was no secret that I had wrung everything out of the car, and I felt that Don could pull something out of it that I couldn’t. If I didn’t call attention to that, then I’m not acting like a member of the team.”

“How would you on pole and Don second hurt the team? You have the whole race to wave him by.” That follow-up brought a few moans from the intelligent writers, a vein popped in Jan’s neck.

Jan pointedly ignored him: “Simple. Don’s the better driver. If I can get him up front, then that’s my job. Besides, I could, and do, learn from him. Maybe someday, years down the road perhaps, I can use his experience.”

I was humbled by his honesty in expressing his view, “Though I don’t think I’m a better

driver,” as I put it to the press. “You’ve all heard this theory: You can only be so good—I can’t be better than Jan, or Paolo or Manuel. You *can* be on the best team, and I’m glad to be where I am. I’m arrogant to the extent that I feel I deserve to be with Ken, but not to the point where it’s my right.

“A few races ago, Jan and I decided that the best way for Ken to get the titles would be for him to support me for the drivers’ championship. I’m sure Manuel and Paolo had the same conversation last year, nonetheless, Jan’s attitude has been delightful, I owe him a lot.”

“Payback is next year,” Jan laughed. “I’ll beat your butt, but with a clear conscience, friend,” as he toasted me with his Coke can.

Another Saturday night, another pole, another helicopter ride back to the hotel. Grace and I were guests of Jan and his girlfriend for dinner, then we retired early. I felt fine, laughing my way through dinner, but I looked forward to being someplace quieter. I got the thought that I’d like to be back in the confines of the cockpit, but I couldn’t decide if that was because I wanted to get the weekend over with, or just because I wanted to go racing. Grace lay next to me, which made me feel secure as we held hands.

Around three or so, I was stirred awake by a low rumble of thunder coming in the patio door. They hadn’t predicted that, I thought, although it was a low-intensity shower and nothing statistically important. Nonetheless, I slipped out of bed and went to the balcony, watching the lightning. The odd Fiat or Renault moved about on the boulevard below. Another time, and I would be speculating on the chances of the rain reaching the track and washing the rubber off, considering the changes we’d have to make on the settings come the morning.

Instead, I remembered another surprise thundershower on a night seven years ago.

My dad had inherited a Quonset hut from the previous owner of the parts store, just to the east on Wabash. Before it was torn down to expand the strip mall, he used it for a warehouse, so it was a logical place to work on my Ford. I had just bought the car a month before, I was in the process of making it fit for racing.

Between the car, school and the store, I was putting in eighteen-hour days, but I found motivation in most every aspect of my life, so my batteries never ran down.

KMMO-FM in Marshall had gone off for the night, so instead of Randy and Reba I was treated to the low hiss of dead air. I was preoccupied, however, with a 351W I was lowering into the car, not mindful of the white noise or the early hour. Therefore, I jumped a foot when a lightning bolt found its way to one of the rods on the grain elevator across the tracks. As I willed my heart to slow down, I heard a light rain begin to tap on the galvanized metal roof of the garage.

How about that, I thought, the forecasters in KC must need a new Ouija board. Unexpected lightning shows were the best, I said to myself, as I towed my hands off and walked to the garage door.

I glanced up to verify that the elevator hadn’t caught fire, as the thunder rolled down the river valley for at least another minute. The evening had been hot enough so the rain was

evaporating on the pavement, lifting a wonderful asphalt smell into the breeze. Not a car for miles, I was able to hear the railroad tracks ping as they contracted in the rain.

Another bolt, this one landed well off to the southwest, near Dewitt or maybe Marshall. It was a delicate filament, curving and twisting, I remembered the five-to-one ratio between light and sound as I waited for the thunder. Still I waited, finally laughing softly when I realized the clouds had soaked up the vibrations. I wondered if that bolt had landed in someone's backyard like that previous one had mine. There was no way of telling, I found something comforting in such an unanswerable question, the world was a big place, after all. If I were put on this earth to wonder rhetorically about trivial things, that was fine with me.

To underline how isolated this shower was, the moon poked out from behind the anvil just as the rain began in earnest. In the moonlight, I could see an airplane at cruising height, a contrail behind it. More daydreaming, I put myself in the place of the passengers on the plane, and wondered if anyone was looking out the window at the lightning, at Brunswick. Blame John and his damned road atlas, for getting me interested in the world outside of town.

I looked at the cuts and burns on my hands. In a matter of days, my racing 'career' would begin. I had no idea of what would define success, the only places I knew racing would take me were my dad's parts counter, possibly the chiropractor.

I didn't expect racing to make me a jet-setter, or have it define my adult life, but those guys in Europe had started somewhere. Most of them had bigger silver spoons in their mouths, but more than a few started out with less than me.

I was so blissfully unaware about how to engineer myself into the upper echelons, and I never pretended that my name would be in magazines and yearbooks. But I was aware of how I was going to help my parents and make the business grow, not coincidentally, they were the same things that would advance me in racing. Eyes open, book-knowledge and common sense, sweat, sweat and more sweat.

My only real goal in life was to allow the folks to retire rich, whether that was their ambition didn't matter to me.

But becoming World Champion?

Grace came up behind me, slipping her hands around my neck. "Interrupting?"

"Not a chance," I replied, as I kissed one of her fingers. The rain had gone on long enough for it to start running down the gutters, burping and gurgling.

"What'cha thinking?" she wondered. I told her of the atlas, thundershowers in the middle of the night, and how my life had expanded in the past few years.

"For example, this place. Como, the Alps, Monza Park. I read of this place growing up. Now, not only am I here, but I'm at ease with it, this world is where I do my work. I've been a lucky fucker. I've been all over the world, won a lot of races, made shitloads of money—"

"Concussion, broken legs, coma," she reminded me.

"But all the time, I've been expanding my knowledge, I'm so glad that has happened. More importantly, my folks are secure. All the people I ever cared about are secure." I squeezed her hand. "And I would have never met you if my life was spent blanketing northern Missouri in c-stores." Her arms wrapped around me. "And tomorrow, I'm going to

be World Driving Champion.”

“Oh, so you’re admitting that now.”

“I have to. Look at everyone who has kicked butt this weekend, and then announced to the press as to why. Now, some people may think that is a lot of pressure, but I choose to look at it as a lot of people placing their trust in me. That makes me feel good, it reaffirms what I’ve felt ever since I went to work for Ken.

“Now, it’s my time. Just like when Marie had to go to the hospital and I had to drive her, I want this responsibility.”

Sunday morning, Grace was having trouble waking up, so I went by Ken’s room and arranged for him to pick her and Jan’s girlfriend up with the next pass the helicopter made. I went back to the room to tell her of the change, she stirred awake enough to kiss me goodbye.

“Did you ever just wake up knowing your life was going to change that day?” I amazed myself by allowing myself to smile.

Jan met my chopper, we took our coffee cups out to the track. We walked the course, discussing the rain. The shower had done little more than settle the dust, though the gravel traps and grass runoffs remained dewy. The cloud cover and humidity guaranteed that it wouldn’t dry up soon, either.

Within ten minutes of practice, we had confirmed the track condition and had tuned our setups for a pace we could run at all day. So I wandered up to Ferrari’s pit, trying to ignore the score of cameramen shadowing me.

Paolo was out on the track, but Manuel was in the pit, acting relaxed. He didn’t bother telling me to stroke it to the checker, he knew better than that. “Just be careful, get this race over so we can celebrate.”

I spotted a small cotton bandage in his right ear, he tried to hide it from sight, probably to keep from thinking about it.

“Damn cotton swab, I lost concentration and nicked the eardrum.” He looked disgusted that I had noticed. “Hell, Don, I need to run. Got to get dialed in, let the Tifosi see me do a few laps.” I thought he was telling me to fuck off, but then he smiled, I waved goodbye and returned to my pit.

The stands were already full at this hour, cheers for me, multiple orgasms when Paolo or Manuel stopped or drove past. Ferrari seemed to be putting in a lot of laps, one minor note was that they’d gotten within a second of us. “They’re number two, they try harder,” Jan commented.

One last task for us; for safety’s sake, we needed to scrub in some tires in case we needed to stop. We weren’t planning to, selecting ‘woodies’, but there could always be a puncture. Jan deferred to me—“No way I’m going out with those two psychopaths out there,” was how he put it. No problem at all, I got my helmet and gloves on. Four runs of three laps each, then wait for Grace to arrive.

The two Ferraris seemed to be racing each other hard but fair, they passed me a few times as I puttered around. As I came up on the Lesmos on my last set of tires, they ran up on me again. Like I’d done already a couple of times that morning, I quickly pointed over my

right sidepod, indicating to them that they were welcome to pass before we all got to the corner. They executed the pass, we all accelerated and upshifted through the first part, and headed toward Lesmo 2. Between the two corners, Paolo got a little further wide than I would have, whether intentionally or not, I couldn't tell.

Manuel saw Paolo move to the left, he ducked inside going into Lesmo 2. I noted this; I hadn't seen this line before, and couldn't see any money in it. It was immediately apparent that his trajectory was all wrong, his entry speed was too high for the sharp turn he had to make. The rear end wobbled, but it caught itself before Manuel could react. Then Manuel turned the wheel left anyhow—this broke the rear end big time, the car aimed straight for the curb.

What in God's name—

As the front of the car hit the curbing, it was launched over the sand trap, and didn't slow any on the wet grass. This was still in front of me, though I was coming up on it fast and I was getting entirely too good of a view of the accident. Sad to say, my next thought was: Fuck! He's going to bounce back into me, and my car is perfect!

Manuel's car augured into the guardrail at a forty-five degree angle with the loudest sound I have ever heard in a race car, including engines blowing behind my head. Sod and parts flew everywhere as his car made a quarter-turn to face back up the track. I was thankful that he didn't bounce back into me, though I was helpless to avoid the shrapnel raining back onto the track. A rear wheel assembly actually overtook me as I slowed, it took my rear wing off and whizzed past my head.

Locking my wheels, I got my car stopped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Paolo make a bootleg turn further down the track. Still jittery from nearly having my head planed off, I threw my belts off and ran back to Manuel's car. Although a fuel line had sheared and gasoline was everywhere, I was still the closest one to him.

Shoes slapped on the pavement behind me. As I subconsciously pulled the electric master switch, I studied the cockpit for some movement from Manuel. My days of being around the volunteer fire department back home had taught me not to go jerking him out of the car or try pulling on his helmet. But popping his visor up revealed that his pupils were unequal, and he wasn't breathing, either.

As I turned away, the look on my face caused Paolo to pull up. Together, we walked across the track to let the emergency crews work, though I knew that they couldn't make any difference. I dropped to my knees as the enormity of it hit me; that was Manuel's car, not that of some tyro in over his head, what in the fuck did Manuel need with all those rescue squads?

This doesn't happen to God.

Two months of brinkmanship at Ferrari had finally come to an end, in a way that no one could have expected. Now the best driver in the world, the man I aspired to be, the personification of honor and loyalty...

I kept checking myself for signs of physical injury, there just had to be something wrong with me. Paolo and I were asked into a police van, we rushed through the mob to the pits, they may have asked us some questions, I can't remember.

Not like in the old days, “Where a preternatural hush fell over the circuit and those in the pits began counting the cars filing in,” now everyone around the track and in the television booths saw it happen on monitors and on big-screens. A roar from a thousand conversations met us as we left the police car, hundreds of cameras whizzing as I found Grace, thank God, and we fell into each other’s arms.

Brian waded through the crowd, yelled “Get into the motorhome, I’ll come for you later,” as he elbowed a path for us.

Grace didn’t try to get me to talk, or try to carry on a one-sided conversation. Just pulled a couple of Dasanis from the refrigerator and handed me one. She sat quietly next to me on the couch, not touching me, watching my emotions play on my face. The water stayed unopened in my hand, as I stared straight ahead at the console containing the television. I had never noticed the woodgrain before...

Without making a conscious effort to do so, I found myself watching the images on the screen. RAI was replaying about three different angles, including Manuel’s in-car, endlessly, like a weather satellite loop on the six o’clock news. But the images wouldn’t process, I couldn’t recognize anything on the screen, it didn’t make sense at all.

After a few minutes, the replays stopped and a picture of me from some photo session this winter was put up on the screen. Of course, the captions were in Italian, but even Grace could interpret the words; “Don Peterson—United States of America—World Driving Champion.”

That made several things official.

My fingers were numb, and not as a result of my iron grip on the water bottle. Grace finally touched my hand, rather than be startled, I collapsed into her lap. Looking at her, I could see all my pain, confusion and anger reflected in her eyes.

“I had no right to do this to you,” I tried.

“Later, honey,” she smiled sadly. I stayed curled up in her lap for a long time, trying like hell not to think.

Once upon a time, no one got old racing Formula One, but things had progressed to the point where there hadn’t been a fatality since I had been in Europe. And Manuel, for crying out loud. He never drove over his head, never so much as a hangnail to show as a racing scar. Although we all take chances, he never really *took chances*. Whatever stupid mistakes he had made were years behind him. Shit.

There was a mob banging on the door of the motorhome, looking in the windows, trying to get a response from me. I wasn’t budging, not only was I not inclined to talk, I couldn’t get off the couch. My self-confidence had taken a beating, and I’m sure there were twenty-odd other drivers who felt the same way.

Brian walked in, to the consternation of the press outside who had never thought of that, normally that would have gotten a laugh. He tossed his clipboard on the table, pulled his headset down around his neck as he sat beside us.

“Your car’s fine—new wing. Ferrari withdrew, of course. Sorry about Manuel.”

He put his hand on my arm. “The crowd, outside of the professionals on the other side of the door here, are in shock.

“The Tifosi just got a new martyr.”

“No shit, though I know what will rile them up; they aren’t planning on canceling the race, are they?”

“Who knows. I’m all for getting out of here, myself.” He was giving me every out, trying to get me on a plane back to London as soon as possible, and let the rioting sort itself out. No titles left to contest, no reason to stick around.

I appreciated his viewpoint, and it made perfect sense to try and escape the restless mood settling over the track. But where to go? The Hell was inside my own head.

No, I wanted to drive, and not for some lame ideal like ‘Manuel would have wanted the race to go on’. Fuck that, Manuel didn’t want to be dead in the first place. What I needed was to concentrate on something besides that wreck for about two hours, to drive my car and do nothing else. Maybe nothing would change, obviously Manuel’s wreck wouldn’t reverse itself, but I would buy myself those two more hours. I needed everything I could get. “Let’s go,” I decided.

I dragged myself out of the motorhome, put my arm around Grace as the mechanics came out to get us. With a well-timed forearm or two, we made it through to the pits. Jan hadn’t left, he let me know he had come to the same decision as me. Paolo had been spirited out of the track by an Italian military unit, apparently the crowd had begun to blame him at least indirectly for what happened.

I noticed on the formation lap that members of the crowd had made it onto the track to spray-paint Manuel’s name and “#1” in various areas. An Argentine flag was fastened to the catch-fence, funny, I never saw the fans act that way when he was alive.

The race: I knew I was focused in the car, making billions of decisions just like in every race, but I can’t remember anything about it. Thankfully, my overloaded heart was lifted from me, I was able to enter the world of yes/no decisions and relentless logic. I won, Jan was second, lapping the field, but I had accomplished nothing.

On the cool-down lap, I accidentally let the engine die at the Lesmos, but that was acceptable. I coasted to where Manuel had hit, studying the unpainted Armco that had been fitted since. Marshals came by, checking on me, but I didn’t even bother waving them off.

Maybe I was looking for an epiphany there, some theorem that would explain this morning to me. Maybe I just wanted to spend more time at the place where my life had changed. Eventually I headed back to the pits by cutting across the wood, my firesock, one glove then the other dropped in my wake, ignored, earplugs...

It was so quiet now, with the race over the birds were beginning to sing again. The wind rustled the trees, combined with the heat, it was just like a summer day back in Brunswick. Twelve years old again, walking the creek bottoms, but with one difference: When I was a kid, I smelled the air, heard the wind, and it filled me with optimism and anticipation of what the next bend or next day held.

Maybe some day I’d feel that naive again. Sadly, I was sure of it. But on this Sunday afternoon in Monza, I didn’t give a shit about anything, looked forward to nothing, and I liked it that way.

Two minutes on the podium, eight bars of the National Anthem, a blank stare at

Lacroix trying to congratulate me, unopened bottles of Moet. Thus was my installation as World Champion.

We were back in Como by three. There was no movement on the boulevard, Italy was in shock. Grace and I were booked out at nine the next morning, hopefully after some sleep.

What I wound up doing was bouncing off the walls, what sleep I got made me more irritable. The cold wrought iron of the balcony railing felt good as I wrapped myself around it, spending hours looking at the sky, waves on the lake.

The earth hadn't stopped, and I wondered why.

I could hear Grace in the room, calling her family. The phrases "what a way to win it" and "he's not handling it" drifted on the air; hell, how do you handle this? Do you want to get good at it?

Grace leaned out of the doorway. "My folks want you to know they're sorry, they care about you."

"I need that, thank them," I replied, exchanging the railing for her leg. "How'd it play back home?"

"NBC opened the show with it, ran the tape once, did ten minutes on Manuel and his career, then it was time for the start," she reported. "Tasteful, if that's the right word, compared to RAI."

She pulled me up, led me inside to the couch. "I need to tell you something," she began.

I appreciated her not hiding this, rather than me having to pry out of her that this lifestyle is too costly for her to take. Come to think about it, I felt the same way.

"We were in the helicopter, the pilot had the radio on. Just AM, funny that I never imagined a radio in a plane before. No matter, the commentators were talking about the race in a dull, blasé tone, just like any pre-race description, I guess.

"Suddenly, the announcers got all excited, although I couldn't understand the Italian, I had no problem hearing your name in the shouting. The pilot tried to translate over the static and engine noise, but there wasn't a lot of concrete information, just repetition and unconfirmed facts. We figured out that you and Manuel had been in a wreck, and it wasn't some bent wing or get-the-spare thing."

Yeah, no kidding. My stomach still felt light remembering the explosion of noise when he hit.

"It took forever, but finally they said Manuel was dead, and they stopped talking about you altogether. I figured that was because they had gotten hold of his wife, so they could release the information. You can imagine the rest, they were shutting up about you because they hadn't, well, reached your mom, or, oh shit...fuck it."

"That was the worst feeling in the world, I was so scared." We held each other for a time, until our crying made us cough in unison. "I couldn't see anything from the helicopter, there were so many people milling around I couldn't see where the cars were.

"Brian came out to the helicopter, shoving people out of the way. The rotors, the crowd screaming, Brian's yelling 'runrunrun'...I thought Brian said something to Ken but I

couldn't be sure, I couldn't yell loud enough for someone to repeat it..."

"Then I saw you come out of that van, and you walked straight to me. I never felt so needed in my life." I needed her still, but I was also angry that she was in this condition. This was too much for someone like Grace, who always was in control of her life; someone was liable. Then I remembered who was responsible for exposing her to this.

"What a fucking day," she sniffled.

After a while, Grace became analytical again, if only to try and get us thinking proactively. "What happened?"

I tried to be dispassionate in my analysis, but it was hard. "You take the Lesmos flat out," I began. "Deal is, you use all the road in doing so, therefore it's not a place where you usually pass anyone. When Paolo ran wide at the first bend, Manuel thought he could get past before the second half. You know, he might have thought he knew what he was doing, though that move never occurred to me."

"Thank God."

"Well, he had a bad ear, maybe he couldn't tell the rear was coming around until too late." I related the exchange I had with Manuel earlier that morning.

"Do you think Paolo suckered him?"

"Paolo could be a real mother in a fight, but you don't get to this level without being one sometimes. Still, punting someone off at a chicane is one thing, throwing a pit bull a pound of hamburger is another."

"I guess you have to learn not to be tempted."

"Yeah," I said without conviction. "But do you remember that last corner in Austria, when I ducked in front of those lapped cars? I don't remember a thing about that corner. I was either assuming or hoping I'd get through, just like Manuel did today. I looked brilliant, Manuel...didn't."

I took a breath, thought some more. "The hell of it is, maybe his mind didn't wander. Maybe he was so confident in his ability that he was going to show Paolo how to drive that corner."

"And you said yesterday that you were only as good as him."

I had no answer for that; logic only goes so far. Usually I'm comfortable with my abilities and limitations, but not when I compared mine with the evidence Manuel had presented regarding his. "I've done things like that before, and in looking back, they were stupid decisions." The difference between my mistakes and his were so small, the consequences of those actions so different. I must be a moron, I couldn't draw a line and say "*This* will get you the afternoon off, but *that* will break the hearts of your wife and daughter."

I received no congratulations from Brunswick when Grace finally got me to call, we talked about the race and the events of the day in the abstract. CNN had gotten to Monte Carlo, Mom commented on the video they were running of Manuel's wife, holding the baby, fighting the press trying to get to the airport. "Not a Ferrari man in sight," was how she put it. I could tell that she was comparing this to Ken's care for my family when I had my accident, her tone suggested she was disgusted by the contrast.

I could tell Dad was torn up, being cheated of an opportunity to praise me, one he'd

been waiting years for. Today had taken a lot out of us all.

Now it was Grace's turn to be alone on the balcony, we both were aware of the other's presence and we didn't invade the thoughts of the other. Thunderstorms were back, with more gusto than those of last night. Thunder echoed off the mountainsides, a torrential rain was falling.

I suppose it was inevitable, but I thought back to the first time I met Manuel professionally. It was in Brazil, my fourth race in Formula One. I went out for qualifying, went too fast on cold tires, and spun 180 degrees, right in front of Manuel. We both touched the barriers, and this was in the middle of his pole run.

"I was in the pits, going over the crash with Ken. He has always been good about me bringing back bent cars, he knew I wasn't crashing on purpose, no point in humiliating me. But Manuel was another story. He had the reputation of being abrupt and narrow-minded with everyone, from drivers on down to the mechanics. He came up to us, asked me 'Are you all right?'"

I wasn't aware I had begun speaking to Grace, lord knows she needed some time to herself. But she didn't mind my intrusion, replying "You were expecting him to kill you, right?"

"Yeah," I laughed cynically. "Made sure I hadn't gotten a concussion in the wreck, so I'd be fully aware when he kicked my head in.

"But it wasn't like that at all. He told me he'd done the same thing in his first few races. 'That corner is as tricky as all hell,' he told me, also indicating he was having trouble getting his tires to work, too. Not a speck of condescension in his voice, I guess he could respect errors of commission."

"Nice little dip right on the racing line. I want the organizers to work on the pavement before we get back here next year,' he mentioned."

"He spotted a television crew nosing around, trying to catch him punching me out or something. That's when he got pissed, yelling 'Get the hell out of Don's pit, this is none of your business,' or words to that effect. He then showed me a goofy smile, gave his regards to Simon and Ken, then got in his spare and set fastest time."

I smiled at the memory. He could have gone a long way toward blackballing me, or worse, ruining my self-confidence. But instead, he added to it. In the seasons to follow, he continued to show me the tracks, how to get around Europe, all sorts of things that made me feel more comfortable.

"I'm sure I thanked him a thousand times for all he did, but it ain't enough, now," I despaired. "I couldn't teach him about pride and vanity and hubris." I really felt I hadn't done all I could, agonized that I had dropped the ball. I expected Grace to say something about my micro-managing or Manuel's responsibility, and she'd have been right, but she just smiled sadly.

One in the morning, still no sleep. I told Grace not to stay up on my account, she continued to insist that she was fine up until she dropped off. Wandering around, I came upon the hotel bar. I didn't know this joint catered to Americans, but the decor suggested

that it did. Jukebox full of fifties music, which I hate, a bar done up to resemble a soda fountain, posters of Elvis and Marilyn and James Dean scattered about. I wondered if European sociologists considered America to be a nation of necrophiliacs, then I remembered all the Tifosi seeing who was best in self-flagellation earlier that afternoon after the accident. The patrons left at this hour either didn't recognize me, or considered it normal for the new World Champion to be roaming around at two in the morning looking like roadkill.

This place is entirely too fucking noisy, I thought, resting my head on the counter, not minding that the bartender wasn't heading my way. Of all the people I expected to see, Peter Francis was at the other end, sipping an espresso. For him, it might have been normal to be out this late, but I was too burnt out to socialize, even if I had wanted to talk to someone like him. But this was where I had wound up, so I stayed where I was and willed him not to notice me.

True to my luck, he spied me and slid on down the bar. I had never talked with him before, letting his reputation do that for him. But now, cornered, as it were, I wasn't willing to be rude or cause a scene.

So, I returned his handshake, letting him carry the conversation for a few minutes. Strangely enough, he sounded human like the rest of us, neither a used-car dealer nor a talk-from-both-sides brown-noser. We talked about Manuel for a few minutes, I was amazed that he considered what happened to be a personal loss. I was under the impression that he viewed drivers, PR aides, and mechanics as equipment—if one breaks, buy another.

But that's not at all like he was acting now. Like everyone else in town for the weekend, he had some anguish to talk out, and I began to feel glad I had run into him. We took our drinks out into the entryway of the hotel. The rain was passing, small streams moved leaves and branches in the gutters and roared through the sewers. The front had finally come through, the air was clean-smelling and cool.

"Don, I don't want to sound paternal or high-handed, but I hope some day you can appreciate what you accomplished this year," he told me.

I sighed heavily. "I wouldn't stay up nights waiting for that to happen," but I told him I appreciated his thoughts.

"I know you've heard a lot of things about me, my shady past, hell, my shady present. I'll admit that most of them are true," Francis told me. "For example, that business with Bill Moore at Ford. I just didn't think I'd get caught, I overestimated my talent for bullshitting my way past a problem. Now, a lot of good people will have nothing to do with me." Among others, me.

But the image I'd had of him was long gone. What it took to get us on the same level...

"You know, I tried to get Manuel just as hard as I went after you," he told me. "That was okay with Jan, by the way. You'd think that someone as conservative as Manuel would have had an alternate plan if Ferrari fell through, but he amazed me by turning me down flat, several times."

That didn't surprise me, I related my phone call with him.

The hotel manager came by, announcing to Peter that his pilot called and was ready to go. "Had to wait for the squall line?" I asked, he nodded affirmatively. "Where are you

heading?”

“London, actually,” he replied. “Mister Hazlett and I are to go over some more details of the transfer, Jan and I are going to glad-hand some more sponsors.” I was warmed by the method of address he used in reference to Ken.

“You know, Don,” he observed, “Getting out of Milan is going to be a bitch and a half tomorrow with all the pulp reporters all over you. If you had half a brain,” he smiled, “you’d get on my plane and let them go to hell.”

“Aw, man,” I thought out loud. “Grace just got to bed, I’d hate to yank her out.” But I got to thinking about the brawl I was sure would occur tomorrow at the airport. I was in a state where I’d probably lose my professional demeanor, and Grace would be in the middle. He did have a point.

“Peter, I really appreciate your asking. Give me five and let me see if she’s up for it.”

“Sure, call me in the bar,” he replied, and I went upstairs. Grace was awake again, but not too concerned that I had wandered off. She was all for fucking off and going home. In fifteen minutes, we were settling our bill, in thirty, we were in Peter’s Lear. The three of us were sound asleep as the wheels went up.

Japan:

We awoke Monday noon to find a gang of the tabloid press on the street beneath my apartment, with more reporters and photographers crowding the roofs of adjoining buildings. It went without saying that this wasn’t a time for Grace to wander around half-naked on the porch.

Some of the good guys from the racing papers checked in. They weren’t out for a scoop; rather they called with sympathy and tidbits they’d picked up. Lacroix, arriving in Monte Carlo the night before, called for a coalition of the FIA and the manufacturers to renew investigations into the safety of all aspects of Formula One. Which was a fucking joke: Manuel’s shunt was the most clear-cut example of driver error in years, no fault of either rampant technology or spiraling costs. If someone wants to kill themselves bad enough, it doesn’t matter whether the tool is a Ferrari or a Radio Flyer. J-P was closing the door on a barn that had never held a horse!

Grace took a call from Ken; he had the details of Manuel’s funeral service, Tuesday in Monte Carlo. Just like Manuel to avoid ceremony and get it all over with quickly—his remains were to be cremated and his ashes literally thrown into the Med. Grace continued to fill me in as I placed a call to Air France. “Jan says he’s not going,” she sounded surprised.

“Well, Jan’s not used to being around depressed people,” I told her. “There are a lot of racing people who feel the same way though it’s not limited to them.” Sure, it was a front, a defense mechanism to deflect his own pain, but everyone has their own way...and Jan’s was to get as far away as possible. “He’ll send an eloquent letter to Valérie explaining the way he feels, and apologizing for his lack of social skills in this circumstance, but this is something he can’t do.”

I got our itinerary settled; fly to Nice, Hertz to Monte Carlo, lunch, the service, then

back to London late Tuesday night. As I hung up the phone, Grace asked, "What about Paolo?"

"That will be telling," I pondered, "if what happened was really an accident or a game of chicken that went too far. Of course, Manuel's family could bar him from attending, but that would make a bad situation even worse." I was sure everyone just wanted the whole thing to be done with, and fast.

I made the mistake of getting too involved with watching the news coverage, by that evening I had gotten past my despair over Manuel, only to have it replaced by depression. We had all the curtains drawn for privacy's sake, but I was beginning to like the look, saw no reason to change it ever again.

We ate dinner quietly. I could imagine how Grace felt, not only being numbed by the shock of it all, but also scared that I was falling into a funk. But forcing me out of my mourning prematurely wouldn't help, either. The trouble was, I wasn't cataloging my memories of Manuel as much as I was looping my brain.

"I'm sorry," I told Grace after a while. "I've had losses before, but this is different, it'll take longer for me to become good company."

"Problem is," she observed, "this is the first time I've been around you when something other than personal or professional success has befallen you."

"It's not like I'm trying to shut this part of my life off from you, you're certainly welcome everywhere else. But I feel miserable, and this is something you shouldn't have to share." I was aware of how selfish that sounded as it was leaving my lips.

She had gotten pissed at this point on previous occasions, but now she just curled up on the couch with me. "We'll just call it a redundant system. I will make sure that you never feel better than I do." She raised an eyebrow, trying to get me to respond. I chuckled slightly.

"But," she continued, "you weren't around every time I've been hurt, and I believe I'm pretty well adjusted. Although I'm glad you want to try and protect me, Don, you know in your heart that you won't be able to in every circumstance."

"I barely knew Manuel, but I'll make an assumption and tell you I think in his last few days his brain was in much the same state as yours is in right now." Grace left that statement hanging, but the meaning was clear.

"Are you afraid of dying?" she asked. Lots of professional writers/amateur psychologists have asked me that question before, and I always regarded that as an infantile query. But since Grace had asked it, it wasn't.

"Grace, what I'm scared of is buying it while you're home, watching me die with an intimate group of about a billion others. Anyone with a heart and a brain wants to pass on quietly, in control of all their faculties, with their family with them—and I'm no different."

"But we can't choose," she sighed. "I've always imagined dying stuck in rush hour, an overpass collapsing on me while I bitch about road construction."

"Grace, if I were driving home to you, humming a happy tune, and a rock hauler pulled out in front of me, that would be okay. If I popped an aneurysm while you had me handcuffed to the bedposts, so be it."

"I'd be the one having a stroke," she coughed, settling into my arms. "But, how about

the other part—everyone watching you die?”

“Well, if John croaked, it would break my heart, the rest of the family’s, and sadden his friends, but that’s all and that’s enough.

“With me, there’s not only that, but everyone who followed me, who knew me from racing feels like a possession of theirs was taken away.” Like I felt about Manuel. “Real race fans are rightfully shocked when this happens: This line of work isn’t that dangerous. In war, for example, you expect to die. But not this. I don’t want to buy it, I don’t want to invest myself in any activity that might appreciably increase that risk.

“Indeed, I don’t participate in one now.”

“I have a problem with an audience watching something so personal,” Grace said. “I realize that the people on the television have a responsibility to report news, and you have to accept that. But it’s just like I don’t want to have sex or give birth on television, some things are just too intimate.”

Death as intimacy? “There was a picture taken of my wreck at Hockenheim when I was still trapped in the car, it won an award from the AP, Kodak used it in their advertising. It was my understanding that it wouldn’t have been used if I had died, but what if it had? That would have been the only view a lot of non-racing people would have had of my life, and to fans, it would have been my monument.” I had discussed that with a lot of racing people, from Ken to Kevin, on down to my folks. It had a way of stopping normal conversation, a rhetorical, depressing subject. But, like slowing to watch a fender-bender on the highway, there was a psychological attraction to the topic.

“I saw that,” Grace interjected. “Life Magazine, ‘The Year in Pictures’, something like that.”

“What was your impression?”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking about the driver, more like another day at the races. You know, Shit Happens, and Our Cameras Were There. The caption mentioned that ‘Don was expected to be back behind the wheel soon’, I flipped the page, that was it. I certainly didn’t consider the driver an idiot, or disapprove of his line of work, though.” She gave me a slightly apologetic look, but what the hell!

“Okay, smart-ass,” she turned to me. “What did you think about the picture?”

“I was amazed at the fact that, after all that flipping and rolling and exploding, both the mirrors were attached to the bodywork.” She gave me an I-don’t-believe-you-but-I-believe-you look, so I continued. “No kidding, as soon as I woke up, Marie brought me a copy of *Bild*, there it was on the cover. I looked at it, and said ‘Shit, the mirrors stayed put’, then Mom snatched the paper out of my hands and threw it across the room.”

“You racing drivers,” Grace shook her head. “What did Ken do with the car?”

“It’s buried in the garden at the shop,” I replied. “He could have given it to some racing museum, especially since I lived, but as time goes on, the more I agree with his decision.”

She seemed satisfied as to my short-term sanity, at least we had a good talk, and were able to laugh some. But I wasn’t as convinced, the funeral was tomorrow.

When Grace had arrived into London with two suitcases, I had teased her about bringing so many clothes. Her rationale was that she didn't know what weather to dress for. The result of this was that she'd included a business-length black skirt and jacket, which was acceptable for the funeral. I had a black suit that I had worn to Ken's OBE ceremony last year and hadn't used since, so that was how we were dressed when we got on British Airways for Nice. The 777 would usually be overkill for the route but with the press and team principals, every seat was filled. Contrary to the mood, the day was cloudless, I pointed out sights to Grace that couldn't be seen from long-distance flights.

About halfway there, I spotted Bill Moore filing down the aisle. I got his attention, he rushed over as quickly as he could.

"Made the mistake of checking with my office at the terminal," he began. "Ferrari have sacked Paolo!"

"What the fuck?"

"That's all my lady heard. Makes no sense, but that's Ferrari."

"What are they smoking? That was the last thing they needed to do," I spat. "First, there goes any continuity from this year. Second, Jesus, there's nothing like kicking a man while he's down."

"Like I said, that's Ferrari for you," Bill repeated, rolling his eyes. He had to move on, we were getting into some turbulence. No shit, my stomach was in turmoil, I also noted that during the whole exchange, I hadn't used "we" in conjunction with "Ferrari".

The tabloid reporters on the ground in Nice were treated to my pumping them for information for a change, which they gladly provided. Compared to my actions at the apartment, they probably thought it was Christmas.

Apparently a newspaper in Rome had obtained a memo from Ferrari in which the decision to fire Paolo had been made the Belgium weekend. Obviously neither Paolo nor Manuel had been aware of this, I wondered if Danilo had, or if it had been his choice to make. The communiqué went on to hope that the competition between the two drivers would elevate the team's performance.

"So, Ferrari jacked them for five races, pretending there was actually a fair fight between them," I concluded. In light of what had happened at Monza, the point was moot. But somehow, the memo had gotten out. "Or maybe someone at Ferrari was as disgusted by this as much as I am, and decided to leak it," I noted.

"Well, so much for me staying out of the administration," I mentioned to Grace on the drive to Monte Carlo.

Even in this party town, with its money laundering, drug dealing and arms brokering, the death of an honorable race driver was still deeply felt. Lunch was quiet, the whole restaurant had the funeral on its mind. No laughter, even the babies were quiet.

On the drive to the church, I noticed new utility work going on at what would be the Tabac hairpin during race weekend. I made a note to remember that next May, be aware of the surface change. I then kicked myself for thinking about that now. Used to be if I'd had an inappropriate thought, or an out-of-place observation, I'd get a laugh out of how my brain worked, but now I was pissed at myself for letting my mind wander.

There were a lot of racing people present, but still no representation from Ferrari or Fiat, not even flowers. What did Manuel do to piss them off? I wondered, realizing that I'd never know, or want to.

Never before in my life have I been in a situation so devoid of happiness, constructive thought or optimism for the future. It was hard to imagine that I'd ever felt any of those things in the past. And I felt scared for the future, too, reaching for Grace's hand as my tears started.

For once, I had justification for wearing sunglasses in public.

Hell, every one of us has to die, but I wished Manuel's had been for something. Well, sardonically, it had been, it solved an irritating problem Ferrari had with the number of seats available in the team.

I'm sure that in their way they were grateful.

Since the memo was reported, there had been not a word of denial, justification, or anything else from Maranello. If someone had charged me with what amounted to premeditated murder in the public prints, I'd sure as hell want to deny it. I didn't think of it as arrogance, as if they felt it was beneath them to respond to the indictment; I believe Ferrari was terrified was to what their little machination had become. Like me, they were going through denial.

I was stirred to the present by the service breaking up. The ninety-minute rite had just flown by in no time, I noticed a number of others who were likewise lost in their own reverie.

We encountered Paolo on the steps of the church. He told me that Valérie had made a point of tracking him down and getting him to promise he'd attend. Even through our sunglasses, I could see that the past forty-eight hours had changed him, as well. You could literally see the difference, his eyes set in a cynical squint. He was unaccompanied by even a bodyguard, that would have been hazardous to his health in Italy, but here he was around friends, or at least people who couldn't work up any animosity.

"Of course, I'll tell Ferrari where they can stick their memo," he mumbled to me. "I'm sorry, Don, but the one thing I'll take out of Maranello is my pride."

I nodded. I would have enjoyed having him with me next year, but I would have also appreciated a team that worked with its drivers, rather than instill paranoia in them.

Paolo was on his way to Zurich after the service. He was still undecided about if he'd go to Suzuka and Sao Paulo, and he was persona non grata in Italy. But his talent was undiminished, and his bravery was now tempered with pessimism. If he could get his desire back, a little thing like being out of a drive couldn't stop him.

Desire. At that moment, the only thing I wanted to do was get into a fetal position and deal with appearances later.

The three of us had met up with Valérie and Marlena. Madame Rittmann was as gracious as you could expect, considering. Paolo bid his good-byes to her as Marlena jumped into my arms. Grace and I took her for a walk in a small flower garden that the church maintained.

Marlena would be a year old in November, her brown hair had grown to the point where it could be put up in a ponytail, and she was up to six teeth, which she tried out on my

finger.

She had seen a lot of new people in the past few hours, but I think she recognized me from before. She was relaxed around me, banging her hands on my shoulders as I held her.

"She's got this expression like 'I've got him and you don't'," Grace said, making eyes at her.

I sighed softly, she felt so good on my shoulder. Marlena smiled triumphantly as she pulled off my glasses. It made me mad to think she had noticed my eyes and was probably getting used to people crying around her lately. Of no consolation was the possibility she may be too young to think this week was so abnormal.

It was entirely possible she would grow up with no recollection of her father. What made me feel cold inside was the idea that once she'd gotten older, she'd draw her own conclusions about the world her father lived in, the way he was manipulated, and who did it to him. In my mind, she wouldn't be able to tell who to blame more; Paolo, Ferrari, me.

I've dealt with bitter people in the past, mostly I've ignored them or kept my contact with them to a minimum, but in no way did I feel I was responsible for their outlook on life.

Marlena was different. My stomach turned when I considered that she might look toward me as one of the people who had fucked up her life, one who caused her mother to cry occasionally, the reason why people clucked their tongues at the mention of her surname. Any sensible person would tell me that I was a token on a game board as well, but I wasn't about to allow that statement to release me from my responsibility.

I couldn't shake this burden that weighed on me, as Marlena rested on my shoulder and dozed off. This could have been my kid sleeping on John's or Jan's or Brian's shoulder.

I hoped that Grace would leave me if I ever got that self-absorbed. I wasn't any better than Manuel, I wasn't stupid enough to delude myself into believing that he'd made a mistake that I would not have.

If that's what it took to be as good as him, to ultimately be as fucking dead and martyred as him, well...

It was getting time to head back to Nice, I gave Marlena a kiss or two as I returned her to her mother. Valérie told me to thank Jan for his caring letter, she totally understood his feelings. She thanked Grace for coming.

As they departed, I sighed, "Their life is screwed forever, and Marlena is the only one who doesn't know."

I threw myself on a park bench to try and clear my head, as Grace brushed a tear off my cheek.

"I'm useless and in the way," I told the sidewalk. "Too much money, at the top of my craft, lucky and grateful that I have you." I turned to her, as she bit her lip, "And goddammit, that pretty little baby reminds me that I don't know a thing. I don't have any answers."

"You may be lost," Grace whispered, "but you're making good time." Outwardly, I smiled, but inside...entropy, entropy, one day I'll be so very small inside, withdrawn to the point that I'll implode.

"You have the same look on your face as Paolo did," she observed.

"Guilt."

"It's obvious that you don't have a monopoly on helplessness," she replied. "But take comfort in that, please. No one is looking at you to be a pillar, whether you think so or not. I know you can feel loss and regret, that's honorable, but is the last thing you're going to feel?"

"Don, you didn't die Sunday."

We were really wasting time here. "Hell, just get me in a race car again, then I'll be okay," I decided, I wonder if Grace was convinced. I was still hurting, but Grace needed me to be better, so I had to try. I appreciated the fact that she was pushing, but would it do any good?

We were back home by nine, asleep by ten-thirty, still in our clothes. Therefore, it wasn't an indecently timed phone call that got us up at eight.

"Good morning, Don," Peter Francis was on the line. "How are you?"

I tried to hyperventilate myself awake. I wasn't put off by his call, but I was curious as to why.

"I'm over at Ken's," he explained. "I want to send you an email attachment." I motioned for Grace to go to the kitchen and snag my tablet. She wiggled her butt as she padded out to the kitchen.

She whistled, obviously she saw something interesting. It was a copy of a copy, but I recognized the Prancing Horse on the letterhead, obviously this was the infamous leaked memo.

"Heard about it yesterday," I sang wearily into the mouthpiece, though I appreciated his efforts.

"No you haven't," Ken replied from another extension, as Grace pointed to the date on the letter.

"Don, look!" she whispered.

"C'mon, Don, put it together," Ken urged in a sing-song voice, as my mind raced. It finally clicked, as I placed the date—July!

"Motherfuck, that's the Wednesday after Silverstone, just after you announced you were selling," I shouted. "And, a month before the memo everyone was hot about yesterday!"

"Check this out," Grace pointed to the very top of the fax. Ferrari letterhead, the header remaining on the copy. I recognized the numbers "33" and "1" on the header: Paris.

"Yeah, and check out that number," I told Ken and Peter. "That text was faxed *from* Paris, then they slapped it on letterhead! Lazy. And what was Ferrari's management doing in Paris three days after Silverstone?"

"Well, they weren't there to have a Crisco-Twister party with Lacroix," Ken assured me. ("Business first," Francis retorted).

"By the time you were whispering in Ferrari's ear, they already had a plan in place," Ken concluded.

"Yeah, but why the cloak-and-dagger stuff?" I asked. "It wasn't exactly a secret that I liked Ferrari. If anything had happened at Ken's it was even money that I'd look toward Maranello. What was their motive?"

"So Lacroix could keep a closer eye on you," Peter ventured. "He could change your

opinion of him, possibly, if you were in one of the 'traditional' teams."

"And if he couldn't get you to play nice," Ken added, "then Ferrari might make it so you'd have the second-best car in their garage. I can't make my cars that far apart in performance if I tried, but Ferrari can engineer 'problems' any time they want. By the time Manuel got done handing your ass to you race after race, you'd be looking for a commentator's job.

"Either way, you'd shut up with the cracks about his administration."

"So, if Lacroix mind-fucks me out of Formula One, a few million is cheap, especially if J-P is kicking it back to Ferrari."

"Sounds good, but how are you going to prove it?" Grace wondered.

"Prove it? I just want to see them deny it!" I rang off with the shop, and went downstairs to see my friends in the tabloids. The past few days had seen them get an education in Formula One, so I had no problem explaining who Lacroix and the FIA were.

I outlined my suspicions, using a lot of "alleged"'s and "hypothetical"'s along with a few winks and a liberal dose of sarcasm. "Now, as a fan, I would be interested in seeing this nasty accusation dealt with as soon as possible," I told the press. "Monsieur Lacroix should be anxious to set the record straight. I'm sure your Paris bureaus can find the FIA's office," and just to be sure, I rattled the address off.

I assured the press that I'd see them again soon, then Grace and I got dressed and went over to my office at Ken's shop. There, I called some of the racing papers, advised them to watch the wire reports and the television news.

Peter was at Ken's ostensibly to go over more of the transition, which was going easier than anyone had expected once people got to know him better. He was trying hard to be personable, one step was his announcement that my garden would stay after the change. The name on the paychecks would be different, but judging from the faces of the office staff and mechanics, everyone seemed motivated.

Almost everyone. I looked across the shop, where our cars from Monza were resting. It took me a second to identify them as such, and the last thing I wanted to do was climb in one.

"Goddamn. Where did I lose control of this?" I asked to no one in particular. The rest of the group knew what I was alluding to, Grace slipping her hand in mine as Ken clapped me gently on my shoulder.

Presently, the news came on, revealing a mob of reporters around FIA headquarters. Questions were being shouted at one of Lacroix's eunuchs, a thin blond youth. While dressed impeccably, he didn't act like he was used to the suit.

"Neither the FIA nor Ferrari have any response to the media reports," he said in a measured tone, repeating the statement in French and Italian. He showed no signs that he was riled by the insolent tone of the press. I'm sure he took his job seriously, taking the statement Lacroix stuffed down his throat as the gospel truth, not able to understand why the reporters couldn't agree with the great man.

"Jumping Jesus," Grace clucked. "No 'what is Peterson talking about', no surprise..."

"And no denial, either," Ken turned away from the television.

"Welcome to the big time," Francis said for his own benefit.

"This took some balls," Ken muttered. "If they spent as much time and effort on the 'sport' as they did on this construct..."

During this, my face hadn't changed expression, I had finally gotten back to assuming the worst from people. "Know what else?" I asked. "'Neither the FIA nor Ferrari'. Why is Lacroix talking on Ferrari's behalf?"

Our secretary called over on the speaker; "Danilio on the phone." This should be good, I thought as I lunged for the headset. "Danilio," I addressed him, no greeting or enthusiasm.

Nor from him. "My boss will probably be trying to get through within the next few days. If Fiat is thinking the same way I am, they're expecting to have to boost your salary. I hope to hell you don't listen."

What was that? "And what's this about 'your boss'?"

"I should have said my former boss. I quit before I made them fire me."

I supposed now I knew who was and wasn't behind the memos and the attendant policies. As well as the leaks. I thanked him for the warning and let him get on with his life.

Our receptionist again: "Don, Valérie Rittmann." With trepidation I hit the extension. She seemed serene, how she could carry herself that way now was beyond me.

"Don, I want to tell you one thing. Manuel told me us that he loved us that morning. I know what was in his heart, he didn't hate anyone, not you, not Paolo. You, Jan and Paolo brought out the best in his driving. He was smiling Sunday morning...and I know he is now."

Grace busied herself looking over Ken's trophy case. I finished the call and floated over to her, forcing myself into her arms, not caring how it looked.

"That's it," I said to the rest of the office. "I'm sorry. Too many of my friends, people I respect, have been played with by these fuckers." This was about as angry as I'll get, but what the hell, I'd already gone through shock and denial already. "Babies..."

"Well, at least Lacroix's been exposed, whether he realizes it or not," Grace observed, though it wasn't like a conclusion.

"The problem's institutional," Ken picked up the thread. "Eliminate one person from a paranoid society, and you still have a paranoid society." Francis nodded.

I had vaguely heard the phones ringing in the office, our receptionists handling the press wanting our response to the admission/denial. To be fair, I owed some of them a lot for the past few days, they had really put the screws to Lacroix and Ferrari.

The next phone that rang, I picked up, bypassing the operator. Some reporter was going to get a surprise. It turned out to be Kevin Tiller from NBC, of all people, to say he was startled would be an understatement.

"Lacroix's a pimp," I ranted. "Except he uses all this fucking money and glamour instead of plain old drugs for his enticement. I will always be at a loss to why people get off on absolute power and domination, to the point that they lose touch with rational thought and compassion." That little girl in Monte Carlo, who didn't know J-P from the man in the moon...

The phone line hissed, I was silent for I don't know how long.

Kevin had to make an effort to get me to talk, after a while he prompted, "So, what's

next?”

Although the room hadn't heard him, it was obvious that he and I weren't discussing which Steak 'n Shake had the best chili. Grace and I locked gazes over our glasses, as the static crackled once again.

“What else?” I laughed sarcastically. “I'm going to Disneyland.”

For the first time since I'd arrived in Formula One, I decided to act like a Grand Prix prick. Grace and I took a van over to the general aviation hangar, where Peter had lent me his plane and pilot once more. We disappeared from sight.

Sanjay had a house on the Firth of Tay in Scotland, his housekeeper was told we were coming. We had nothing besides the clothes we had on, but I wasn't worried about sartorial excellence. Besides, that's why God made AMEX.

Even though I hated the way I felt, angry and a little selfish, I think Grace liked me this way better than all the anguish and denial I had gone through before. However, it wasn't good for my long-term health to stay this bitter for long.

We wandered on Sanjay's property. Fifty degrees, thirty mile an hour wind, raining like hell. A beautiful summer day, if the staff was to be believed! The restless conditions were fine with me, if it had been sunny and mild, I might spend too much time clearing my head and getting lazy.

I had been spending months oscillating between having no clue as to what the next day held, and standing aside smugly as good fortune fell into my lap yet again. The lows were gaining on the highs, unfortunately; both were wearing on my sanity.

No, this was going to be resolved here; the weather, Grace on my shoulder, the fact I was a guest all would move me along quicker.

“There's no way I'm going to drive for Ferrari,” I said after a time. “Knowing what I do now, sitting in that car would insult too many people.”

“Pieces of silver.”

“But the last thing I want to do is make a bunch of lawyers rich,” I told her. “Though contracts are broken all the time in Formula One.”

“Yeah, money does wonderful things,” she observed. “But do you want the reputation of breaking deals right and left?”

“To be honest, it wouldn't affect me professionally, I'd be known as a canny manipulator. But my professional position is the last thing I'm worried about. Where else would I go? September is a whole lot different than July in terms of driver lineups. Not to mention that my bargaining position would be extremely weak, now I'd be asking for a ride, rather than someone wanting me.”

The more I thought about it, it became clear why Ferrari had come through with such a good offer right off the bat. They hoped I'd see the dollars and get a hard-on, and I'm afraid that's what I did.

The sun came out, if anything it got colder. I stroked my two-day growth, the most I'd had in years, it felt foreign to me.

“And even if I get a ride with Acme Racing, with my salary taking half their budget, that

means I'll be waving at Jan as he laps me three times a race. I didn't want to do that when Ken retired, I still don't." I didn't mind paying my dues, whatever that meant, I'll accept the possibility that the car or me will have a bad weekend, but sixteen bad weekends in a row? That disgusted me.

"That's one thing I wondered about," Grace said. "What happens if you never have another year like this again? No championships, no wins, no podiums?"

"As long as I've still got motivation, sure, I'd put up with a less-than-perfect year," I replied, though that was a stock answer I gave to the magazines who only interview me once a season. Was I really committed? Verb or adjective?

"Yeah-but, yeah-but, yeah-but," Grace smiled. "Don, do you know what would make me happy? I want to see you in an environment where there wasn't so much negativity." She found my hand. "I know that's an awfully vague statement, and I apologize for that."

For my part, I wondered about this purported negativity, those last few laps at the Österreichring, the start at Jerez rebutted her point rather well. But then why were we having this conversation in the first place?

"Don, you've been so fucking miserable lately, you aren't moving on. I don't mean grieving, you have a right to do that. But you seem so...caught...so used to knowing what was going on, being in charge. Now things have changed."

You knew this could happen at any time, Don. Time to face up. "I don't know anything anymore. Grace, I'm scared."

"That's where I come in," she smiled, and kissed me like the friend I needed.

The sky was getting darker, with the sun going down, it was time for morons like us to find a fireplace. But even though the sky was leaden and raining, suddenly my heart was content. I had Grace beside me, I *would* get my inspiration back. "I think you're going to save my life," I told her, snuggling into her wet hair.

"No kidding," she giggled quietly. Her arm had goose-bumps on it, in response, my heart skipped. How long had it been since that had happened?

"What'cha going to do now?"

My own light bulb appeared above my head. "I'm going to piss a whole lot of people off, that's what," I replied, speeding up toward the house like a man on fire.

On Friday morning, Grace and I sat quietly on folding chairs in a meeting room at Heathrow. We busied ourselves by polishing off pastry and coffee as we chatted with hostesses moving partitions around.

I had called a press conference, not only for the racing papers, but also the tabloids and big dailies. Though I wanted to make a big production out of this, I wanted to share a final moment with Grace before our very noisy day got going. She caught me gazing at her, smiled and tossed her head, a mixture of nervous excitement and pride over what we had accomplished together over the past two days.

We heard the unmistakable sound of a pack of cynical, jaded racing journalists coming down the corridor. They are the type of people who would complain about winning the lottery—the taxes, you know.

“Ready to make history?” Grace asked as we scooted behind the partition. While the media filed in, they were met by an airport administrator who provided no information, but kept the group entertained with baseless speculation. Baseless because I had only told Ken and Peter what I was going to say, they had relayed it to the works staff only this morning, after taking their cell phones away for a little bit.

Everyone else assumed that this would be a “how does it feel?” discussion, now that the business of Manuel was out of the way and a suitable mourning period was over. Nice guess, but no.

Grace gave me a long kiss, then I went out onto the stage to a generous amount of applause.

“Thank you very much for that,” I acknowledged them. “I can’t tell you how much the support of racing press has meant to me, especially this year.

“I have a rather incoherent and rambling statement,” I began, to a burst of laughter. “First, I must say that I am extremely honored and blessed to join the roster of World Champions, people whom I have admired and enjoyed watching most of my life. Both the team’s and my own accomplishments haven’t really sunk in yet, although in years to come I’m sure I’ll take pride in them. In this profession, in this class of racing, at least, I have reached the pinnacle. That, frankly, is amazing.

“Of course, that list I mentioned includes Manuel Rittmann. I am going to miss him.” Some of the audience looked at the floor, others stared into space thoughtfully.

I resumed after a minute: “I don’t have to go over the circumstances or the complicity between the FIA and Ferrari, you all have done a fantastic job of exposing their conspiracy.

“Guys, consider this: I am presented with the prospect of driving for a team whose leadership has shown no respect for its team leaders—their drivers. And doing this under the aegis of a sporting administration that condones, facilitates, and participates in those activities.

“The idea of me taking part in an atmosphere such as this would not only be an insult to Manuel and his family, but also to anyone who races or spends money in Formula One for the ‘sport’ of it. Insulting to those individuals who understand honor, obligation, loyalty, and trust; those things that should go along with such an endeavor.”

The look on some reporters’ faces gave the impression that they assumed I would now use my cartel as World Champion to effect changes in Ferrari’s management, perhaps even tilt at Lacroix’s windmill.

“It may sound corny, but by tacitly approving of this behavior by driving for Ferrari, I would run counter to the way my folks raised me. It’s as simple as that. Moreover, this does not conform with the way Ken ran our team, and is not a way an ‘enlightened’ organization treats its family.” My hands were clenched, my disgust showing again. But it was going to be all right, I took a breath, the best was yet to come.

“As my contract obligates me to drive for Ferrari for next year, you are aware of my conflict, although we all know it isn’t one that hasn’t been resolved before.” The audience knew all about that, here come the lawyers. Sorry, but—

“Well, this is how I’m resolving it: When the checker falls in Sao Paulo, I will be a

retired Formula One driver.” I swear to God I actually heard a pen drop, as two hundred chairs creaked in response to two hundred people sitting up suddenly.

“I’m not doing this as a punishment for those judged by popular opinion to be guilty, that will be for others to decide.” Reactions in the room ranged from happy laughter, to satisfied smiles, to outright panic from some of the journalists.

An airport manager caught my eye as he pointed to his watch, in response, I stood up. That brought the writers rushing forward, shouting questions. I yelled back, “This is by no means goodbye, in light of two races remaining, which of course I will run—I *will* do what I have been paid for. However, I have a plane to catch. Thank you for your time, and good morning.”

Due to pulling a few strings, we weren’t officially listed on any manifest, the names “G. Danforth” and “D. Pape” wouldn’t ring any bells with even a reasonably motivated reporter. So, no one knew where we were going!

Transiting at Dulles was easier than I expected—not one person recognized me. Might have been different had I used United, but I was—again—slumming on non-hub airlines, British Airways to Delta.

Grace was excited about going home, I was thrilled too, but also nervous about any delays. For what I had planned for this afternoon, I needed to be on the ground and settled in by five eastern. A friend of mine had his own life-altering decision to announce, and I wanted to show my support.

After getting a Hertz (to worry about the luggage in a day or so), and grabbing a burger, we sped to East Point. Grace pulled the Fusion into Robert Decker’s parking lot, or rather to the loading dock as the place was crowded with television trucks.

“Sneaking in the back, huh?” Grace laughed, as we sat on the dock with Robert as the time approached. “I thought you were king shit or something!”

Right at four, Decker stepped out of his office and walked into his shop, laughing with the area sportswriters and freelancers from various racing magazines. No big production like those seen in Europe, it was hard to tell when the bull session ended and the actual press conference began.

“Well, I’d mentioned to y’all previously my intent to run a car in Cup next year,” he began. “To be honest, it was a back-burner deal, I’ve been too busy selling parts to the other guys to really do the chassis justice.

“But, recently I received a kick in the pants, and offer I couldn’t refuse, to coin a phrase. As a result, I’ve decided to ignore all common sense, and go directly into Cup beginning right now.”

There were a few murmurs from the audience, though they weren’t impressed, to be honest. Lots of guys’ ambitions get the best of them when it comes to big-time racing. But one difference I noted from the world I’d just left were the smiles and goodwill that those in the press seemed to exhibit during Decker’s announcement.

“I’ve decided to run Fusions, we’ve already got full support lined up from Robin Holcomb and all the R and D people at Ford SVO.” That was noteworthy, Ford was solidly behind a number of proven race-winners already, usually there is a Catch-22 involved in

results versus factory support.

Decker pulled a tarp away from a primed Fusion in the middle of the shop floor. Nice, but all assembled had seen show cars before, and this, right now, was a sorry example. "Sorry about the paint, I'll be honest, we're still negotiating the sponsorship." He waited a second. "Actually, I think our sponsors don't even know they'll be our sponsors yet!"

The crowd roared, and Decker had the look of a man who wasn't really worried about it.

"Oh yeah, the driver," he slapped his head, as I walked out to the car and shook his hand.

Disbelieving gasps and laughter were replaced by a standing ovation from the press as I grabbed a microphone.

"Pulled this guy out of single-seaters," Decker continued. "He says he'll work cheap."

"Compared to my last drive, at least," I replied.

"Since I hacked off a lot of the press this morning," I told them, "I'll try to make it up to you now."

Kevin was in the first row, I noticed him first. "Man, what are you doing at this rinky-dink photo op?" ("Rinky-dink?" Decker choked.)

"We were doing pre-production for the Atlanta 500, that's what. You're right, normally we'd get someone local to cover this, but I was in town, what the heck?" That seemed fair.

"We were all sitting around just now, discussing what happened in London this morning and wondering where you'd turn up next, and now this..." That was worth a grin on my part.

"I can figure out why you got sick of Formula One, but why NASCAR?"

"What I consider fun in racing is: Hard racing, teamwork, hot, sticky weather, Pizza Hut in the hotel room at night." We all laughed about that. "There's plenty of that here. You draw your own conclusions about what's over there."

"I want to explain that I don't think of this move as a reward or vacation, just because I'm 'World Champion' won't mean diddly at Bristol, for example. I fully expect to be shown around, so to speak, by the guys here already, for a good long time to come."

A few knowing chuckles came back in agreement. "Maybe we ought to leave it in primer for a few races," Decker murmured.

"Also, now I have the opportunity to properly repay Bill Moore, Robin Holcomb and Ford for getting me where I am," I continued. "I'm still a Ford man, three days ago, I couldn't say that."

"Did you become burned-out in Formula One?" came another question.

"I was burned *out* of Formula One," I joked. "Water under the bridge, I'm looking forward to learning again." Most of the questions I'd heard so far paralleled ones Grace had asked me recently, here came another:

"How about the idea that once you were the champion in Grand Prix racing, everything else is downhill?"

"Gee, you're right," I admitted. "Think I'll go slit my wrists. But first, some buffet."

Kevin came back, more thoughtful this time. “You’ll admit, though, it seemed like what happened to Manuel was the media and fans getting tired of him winning all the time. Pressure’s one thing, attacks in the sports pages is another.”

“Well, you guys wouldn’t do that, would you?” I held my palms open to the reporters. “I assure you I won’t be winning all the time, I don’t think you’ll be bored!”

The first NASCAR race after Sao Paulo would be the season finale here in Atlanta, in mid-November. To not jeopardize my performance in Ken’s car, I wouldn’t even get in the car to test until after my return from Brasil. It may have made some sense to run at Charlotte that weekend, I’d be in the states anyhow. But I didn’t want to start my learning curve in the middle of someone else’s championship run, even allowing for the fact that Ken wouldn’t mind me moonlighting.

“No, tomorrow morning I’m heading to Missouri, I’ll watch it on cable.” Grace had been away from her office for too long, it was time for her to jump back in and sign a few paychecks.

Just like it began, the presentation slowly wound down, everyone swapping stories, wishing me and Decker well. Grace and I left around six-thirty, I drove this time, for I had one more stop to make.

Dinner at the Eleventh Street Pub, in the basement of the Residence Inn I’d become familiar with. She had picked it but I liked the symmetry.

“Grace-o’-mine,” I began, “I’m afraid that I’ve run out of eloquence. The past week has been as tumultuous as any in my life, and I owe you for my sanity.”

She smiled contentedly.

“I know that if something similar—or worse—happens I can turn to you and you’ll help me. I need you, lady, and I’m happy to admit it. As much as that, when it happens to you, not only do I want to be the one you turn to, but I want you to depend on, expect me to be there the second you need me. And my ego is healthy enough that I know I will help you, love you like no other.”

She grabbed my hand, our fingers intertwined as she shook excitedly.

“And I want everyone to know of this debt, my gratitude, and my love for you.”

She took a breath for the first time in five minutes. “Eloquent enough, but definitely perfect. Thank you for honoring me—for loving me.”

“Marry me, Grace. It’s time. Our time.”

“Yes it is. Yes it is.”

We stared at each other. The look on her face—for the first time, something had happened to *both* of us. We were different now and we both knew it.

We won.

“Yes.”

“Want to see if some jeweler knows what to do with my AMEX?” I asked her as we floated out of the restaurant. She replied by making a quick text, grabbing the car keys and motioning me to the passenger door.

“They’ll stay until we get there!”

“You knew this was coming?” I asked, she nodded. “Then how could you handle the

suspense of waiting for me to pull my thumb out?”

“There wasn’t any anxiety, honey.” Her face glowed. “Just the most delicious, tantalizing anticipation—I knew. And don’t talk about your thumb like that, you’re getting me horny.”

She went right to one she’d obviously had her eye on for some time. Generous amount of rockage—I’ve seen bigger but everything was in proportion. She went for white gold, which surprised me, though I liked the way it set off her skin and hair.

“It’s platinum, not white gold!”

“That’s more like it,” I tossed the card on the glass.

At her house...a happy Ginger on one end of the bed, happy us on the other. We sat in bed with all the lights on, watching the colors change within the stones, the blue and yellow, so electric it made my eyes hurt, or that was my excuse. I don’t know which one Grace used....

I had a whole row of the MadDog to myself Saturday morning, and there were no reporters awaiting me at Lambert, either. Mizzou was opening the football season by getting their asses kicked by Illinois, all the sports people were in Columbia to cover the game. I took 61-67 at Wentzville to get clear of the crowd, the increasing traffic continued west on 70.

With NASCAR at Charlotte and CART at Elkhart Lake, there were no additional journalists to call me at home. I really didn’t have time for them anyhow, I had to accept congratulations from the folks, among other things...

I parked my Hertz at my parents’ house, Mom greeted me at the door. “Well, it looks like I won’t have to get up at six-freaking-thirty to watch you anymore!” Aside from where I would now make my living, Mom was neither more nor less happy about my decision. Dad, however, noted the marketing advantages of a big ol’ Fusion with lots of billboard space to advertise the Pump ‘n’ Run.

“Thanks, for a second I thought you were just glad to see me,” I grunted.

I ran as best I could down to the car when Marie and John pulled up. Marie fixed me with a puzzled look, which only got more so as I held out my cell phone.

Upon which was displayed a photo of Grace’s manicured hands and that rock that continued to make my heart flutter.

She ho-ho’d and jumped, twirling a half-turn to show John. “Hot diggety damn! Finally!”

“I think you and Grace were the last ones to realize,” Mom observed.

Marie yelled to the kids. “That’s nice,” they called back.

“One billion Chinese, your niece and your nephew,” John replied apologetically. Marie was phoning all her friends, calling down to the store, laughing her ass off.

Dad asked, “Is Grace acting as smug as you?”

“I reckon. Not that I mind—maybe I’m still trying to put into words how I really feel,” I reported.

I didn’t need to tell my family the hows and whys of Grace and me deciding to marry, they felt the chaos I had been going through. I’m sure they were relieved beyond telling that

Grace was there with me when I needed her.

“Like I said, we all knew you two were it,” Mom repeated. “Just because you talked about her so much. All the others were ‘this girl’, or ‘who I was out with last night’, when you mentioned them at all.”

“And then when you brought her to the house,” Marie jumped in.

“But I’ve brought people up here before,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, that bimbo from Dallas, the one who thought the Indy 500 was this really, *really* big movie theater,” Marie retorted.

I nodded off in front of the television, listing to the Grand National race from Charlotte. I needed a weekend like this, no chaos, no driving, just a warm feeling when I thought of Grace, missing her napping next to me.

That evening, Marie called her. When the phone was answered, Marie said, “Hello, Sis!” which made me feel great. Marie wanted to hear Grace’s side of how I proposed, and in between the “Aww”s and “Bullshit”s, I remembered how I felt when Marie and John got engaged, I liked the idea of romance and teamwork and facing the future. I was more than a little jealous of those two at one time, but there was nothing in it now.

Marie threw the phone to me. “Hi, sweetie,” Grace said, Marie patted my shoulder as she left the room.

“Were all your friends duly impressed?” I wondered.

“Shit yes. I thought Carol was going to come in her panties,” she laughed, remembering. “That was the most out-of-control I’ve seen her. We sure do good work.”

“You betcha!”

“Mmm. Did you tell them about the ceremony?” she wondered.

“Damn, I forgot. I got so preoccupied thinking about you.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

“There’s not really a place here in town. I’ll have to look for a hall somewhere close on Monday,” I decided.

I heard a whoop from the kitchen, apparently Marie had been snooping on the other extension.

“They’re going to have it up here!” she yelled out to the porch.

“Well, where else did you think?” I called back, “If I’m going to be living in Georgia, I should at least have the wedding here.”

“Hell, I kind of figured you for a courthouse quickie,” Marie explained.

“I guessed they’d tell us after it was over,” Mom agreed. “That we got any warning at all is a bonus.”

“What’s the dress going to look like?” Marie decided to cut out the middleman.

“Don told me that as long as it showed my boobs and shoulders, and was white, he couldn’t care less about the rest.”

“Sounds like him.”

“Of course, I’ve got nightshirts that’ll work,” Grace thought out loud. “Be easier for him to tear off of me, too.”

Sunday, I fielded calls from various in-laws and outlaws, offering congratulations and

sympathy. More than a few asked me to get them tickets for Daytona next February, I had to admire their balls. Judging by the response I was hearing, it became apparent that the ceremony would outstrip any of the halls in the area. Add to our immediate families, Grace's friends from the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and my group from Europe...

I had that pleasant problem to consider as Dad and I drove down to the parts store Monday morning. We spent an hour before opening down the sidewalk at the cafe, discussing bean prices with the locals as I ate donuts with Diet Coke ("Combines to make water and flour," I assured them.)

I was catching up on the Post-Dispatch coverage of the Cardinals when the phone rang. Our station in Quincy needed to have the fuel filters on the gas pumps changed. The store manager, a lady who used to be the trophy girl at Pevely Raceway, was game to change them herself, all she needed was to be shown once. The first time you do it, it's tricky, after that it's like changing your oil filter.

Dad was looking up the Gilbarco number in a Rolodex, when I offered to go take care of it. "After all, I might as well earn my salary, I need to go up to Moberly anyhow." Dad shrugged, I asked him how many dispensers they had. He said twelve, so I grabbed two cases, one for next time, stole the F350, and headed toward Quincy.

About ten miles east of Brunswick, I passed a Buick with Indiana plates heading west. I thought I recognized Kevin behind the wheel, he favored those big GM boats. I almost stopped and went back, but I knew what he wanted, if he wished to talk that bad, he'd get directions from Dad.

I made Quincy about nine-thirty, shot the shit with the manager while we waited for her relief to arrive. When she was covered, we went out and I showed her how to do the filters. Pop the access panel, turn on the pump, trip the emergency flapper, wrench the old filter off, then reverse the process. The first one took sixty seconds; the second, thirty. By the third one, she was showing Kevin how it was done, as he had roared up, bugs all over the windshield, watching us with feigned disgust.

"I'm chasing the most wanted man in sports across North America, and he's working on gas pumps," he said, disbelievably.

"Quit your whining, at least the scenery was nice," I replied. Trees were starting to change, the color on the river bluffs was breathtaking. To cool Kevin off, I bought him a tankful and we repaired to the Golden Corral to sit and talk.

"Thought you might like to see these," as he passed his tablet back and forth, bookmarked to various autosport sites. "Your old buddy Lacroix is looking for that cyanide capsule about now," he summarized for me.

The opinions of the stories were generally split three ways; some expressed anguish over the events of the week, others had gone past that and were now out for Lacroix's blood, the rest threw their hands up at the whole business, considered it normal.

Autosport weighed in with a blistering commentary, Lacroix's "Simple-minded attempt at blackmail setting Formula One back twenty years". Autocar paid me a nice tribute, saying "We all knew Don Peterson was too good to be true", and thanking Ferrari and the FIA for "shooting Santa Claus".

"You're still not going to admit that you're enjoying this?" Kevin asked.

"I've tried to comport myself in a positive manner...I guess I'll just be positive somewhere else."

"See, look at this," I pointed out the front page of a Rome tabloid which was famous for stirring up bullshit.

"My Italian's rusty," Kevin apologized, smirking.

There was a picture from after Manuel's funeral, Grace and me in dark sunglasses, looking justifiably forlorn. No explanation of the circumstances, no mention of Manuel. The site had ample time to run a more representative shot of us, several had moved on the wire services since the Monza weekend.

But the caption was the best part: "As close as it matters, it reads 'The girl who stole Don from Ferrari.'" I arched an eyebrow at him.

"That took some guts."

"No shit," I sighed. "You know what bugs me? In all the time I've been over there, I've never talked to a person from this rag, never seen one of their people around the shop, so it's not like they pissed me off or vice versa. I guess a face-to-face discussion is too much for them."

"Yeah, why clutter up a juicy story with something so mundane as the truth," Kevin snickered. The nice thing about talking with him, he wasn't looking for some retort from me, though he'd be on TV Tuesday night from Indy with this week's edition of Speedweek. For one thing, the hard facts in this matter would more than fill up his half hour, no need for my snide comments about those who didn't see this my way.

Kevin dropped me off back at my truck, I leaned in his window, resisting the urge to Rain-X his windshield.

"Don, let's say Lacroix dies in a bordello fire, Ferrari gets bought by...*Caterpillar*, whomever, Francis and Ford make up, then your phone rings?"

"Wrong number." I had anticipated this. "Every time I took a start, I'd think of the inbred organization Lacroix, or the next moron, had. On Monaco weekend, I'd be thinking about driving past Manuel's house rather than driving. At Monza..."

"Y'know, race drivers are supposed to be able to switch that off," Kevin rolled his eyes.

"Guess I'm a piss-poor racing driver, then," I replied in much the same tone. "Kevin, thanks for coming out—without a camera crew."

"They'll be at your house in a couple weeks," he smiled. "Try to shave and wear a nice shirt, at least."

I stopped in at Peterson Coca-Cola, dodging trucks in the parking lot, being whistled at by the route drivers. That pesky problem of market share was on the way to becoming passé, there was talk of actual product manufacture here in the future. Norfolk Southern and a rail contractor were surveying for a spur track, we'd be getting packaging and syrup in by rail if that plan came to pass.

I emailed the tabloid page to Grace's office, then called a moment later. Carol answered, tsk-ing as she heard my voice.

"Moth-er fuck-ers," she clucked. "Don't they have libel laws in Italy?"

"Hi, honey," Grace sang into her extension.

"What do you think of the story?" I asked, as I studied it myself.

"Well, if they wanted a picture of me, all they had to do was ask. Everything gets fuzzy with those thousand-millimeter lenses. Although, I'm glad they spelled my name right," she concluded, to laughter from her end of the phone.

I was in my office, though I had pulled the phone out to the doorway to wink and chat with people who happened by. The place still smelled new, packing boxes filled my room. There was no time to worry about appearances, we had a company to run.

I repeated my concerns about finding a hall, the general manager walked by with a suggestion: "Why don't you do it here? Have the wedding in the conference room, the reception in the warehouse."

"Sure," Grace replied from her end. "Bump up the heat, it'll be perfect."

Maybe, I thought. The place would be closed for the Thanksgiving weekend anyhow, an hour with a forklift would clear it out nicely.

I put her on the speakerphone, I hadn't noticed, but quite a few people had heard their boss mention 'wedding' and had come around to my door. I had my nose in my Rolodex, looking for my insurance guy's number, there might be a liability problem. "The acoustics are going to suck," I spoke to the phone, giving her every chance to back out.

"So what? They always do," she replied. "I was at a reception where the sound was so treble-y that it sounded like Bob Dylan was singing 'Could I Have This Dance'."

So, with the arrangements in the care of Marie and Grace, I picked up my helmet bag and flew Kansas City-Seattle-Narita for the Japanese Grand Prix. I went over early because seemingly 666 journalists, radio shows and television crews wanted 'exclusive' interviews. I didn't mind, though they were thorough in their questioning and in following me around, and I was amazed at how tired I became.

Last year, with more time to kill, Bill Moore and I ran across Manuel one evening. We went out to dinner, Bill insisted I try Fugu, or pufferfish. Normally, I wouldn't pick this dish, too much work involved. Just give me a pizza, a plate of pasta, I know that I can eat everything there, no fiddling around with bones or fat. I was struck by Bill's choice of entree, you have to be a licensed chef to prepare Fugu, one wrong sliver and you're either paralyzed or dead.

"That's what you get for losing the title," Bill had said, winking as I thoughtfully took a bite. Tasted like fish to me, it wasn't any revelation. That was great, because I expected my last meal on earth to be something spectacular.

I noticed Manuel wasn't touching his. "Wouldn't do Mister Moore any good, would it? I wasn't the one who lost the championship!"

Needless to say, I was happy to get into the paddock and get to work on Friday. There was a different atmosphere in the pits, half the journalists were on some kind of crusade to try and get me to change my mind. Either they were in Lacroix's employ, or else they had delusions that by the weight of their rhetoric I'd see the error of my ways and beg Ferrari for my seat back.

This extended to Jan, in a way. “Just answer me one question. You’re leaving the most advanced, fastest...best cars. Why are you going to drive in circles in a bus with 1950’s technology?” He was as glad as anyone to see Lacroix get fucked over, but he was honestly puzzled as to why NASCAR, of all things.

“Come on down to Daytona, we’ll get those buses three-wide at 190 and we’ll see how much time you spend bitching about the lack of technology,” I told him.

He spent a second mulling that over, decided to quit the subject. “Press got kind of nasty about you two.”

“They lived up to my expectations,” I replied sadly. “Grace will either get used to it, or she won’t. I think she will.”

Out on the track, Jan and me quickly picked up where we’d left off, he was two-tenths ahead after Saturday. Here we go again, the press conference after qualifying focused on the seeming correlation between the titles being wrapped up, and Jan beating me.

“So now the team orders are off and it’s every man for themselves?” he was asked.

“There’s only one thing that’s been changed since Italy, the last time you insinuated I was sandbagging,” Jan snorted. “We can race each other until the last lap, not like that has anything to do with how we qualify.”

“Sure, we’ve had the best cars, and maybe in one or two races we’ve carried all before us. We still have to work our butts off, the car doesn’t drive itself. I guarantee the blisters on Don’s hands are the same size as mine.”

“Any of you that were in Belgium and Austria could tell that I had it all under control,” I mentioned sarcastically. I had grown weary of trying to convince those reporters, while Jan was still taking the accusations personally.

“But to put my best spin on this, I’m anticipating a close race. Ken knows we’re going to race smart, if that means we are wheel-to-wheel, then that’s what’ll happen. If Jan laps me, that’s okay, too.”

I ought to mention what happened to Paolo in between races. He’d developed brains to go along with his balls, slapping Ferrari with a court order telling them to allow him to drive the last two races in his contract. He was wary about the impression some people had gotten about him being run off, and he was responding impressively.

To read the press reports, you heard that he wanted to leave Ferrari with the obligations on both sides fulfilled. But sit and listen to him say the words, however, and you’d notice the acid in his voice. He spent qualifying doing nothing, honestly, five laps on Friday, three on Saturday, tenth on the grid.

At the start, Jan and I made nominal starts, figuring there was plenty of time to do whatever we had planned. So when we came around the pits for the first time, the order was Jan; fifty yards to me; ten yards to Paolo, who was driving hellbent for election. I could hear his engine hitting the rev limiter as he shifted, then the pitch changed as he over-rode it. He wants to pass me bad and soon, I thought, but he made no effort to get around me. The reason was that he never shifted from fourth, the revs going higher and higher, until the connecting rods left the block and blew the engine, right in front of Ferrari’s pits.

“Jesus, did you see that?” Jan shouted over our radio.

“See it, I fucking felt it!” I yelled back, remembering to check for oil the next time by.

“He had to catch an early flight, I guess,” Jan replied.

As soon as Paolo blew, Simon and Bill transmitted a new map to our cars’ engine management systems, effectively slowing the cars and removing any chance that the engines would be overworked. That didn’t mean we couldn’t drive ten-tenths, just ten-tenths of a slightly smaller whole.

Jan led the first nineteen laps, until I decided my fuel load had burned down enough. I strung together three fastest laps and took the lead, cleanly and without much argument from Jan. Meaning, he left me 185 centimeters of room on the inside of the first corner, when our cars are 170 centimeters wide!

Two laps later, Jan reset fastest lap and took me on the outside of the same corner. Shit, I thought, wide-eyed in the cockpit. How did he do that? What was more important; can I? Next lap, Jan pulled me down the pit straight, I moved left, emulating Jan’s previous lap. He didn’t cheat, didn’t run wide, he let me try. He knew that I’d want to check that move out, therefore he wasn’t worried to see me move to the outside.

Eyes wide open, not breathing, hands making small corrections to the wheel, controlling any nervousness in the car by using the gas. Obviously, one wrong guess and hello sand trap, watching Jan drone around, but there was no thought of that. Just confidence that the car would hold.

And I did it. Just like Hillary on the summit of Everest, or Yeager breaking the sound barrier, once I’d done the corner, I got used to it, another part of the puzzle. That doesn’t mean I immediately disdained the accomplishment, on tape later, I banged my fist on my chair, allowing myself to feel excited. However, the race didn’t stop to allow a discussion of the pass.

No time, indeed on the same lap, Jan cut inside going into the esses. He carried too much speed, I went inside and re-passed. Then I went wide and he got me again. The crowd was on their feet, now totally absorbed in our dance.

About five laps later, Jan towed me down the pit straight once more. He moved to break the draft, I copied his move exactly. I had no explanation as to why I moved at the instant he did, or as much. Jan jinked again, the other way, and I covered that move, too. Still a third time, same thing, as we reached the corner as if tied together. This time, my front end had no air, and I fought understeer upwards of 150 miles an hour into the corner.

After that washout, I decided that as far as that corner was concerned, that was as far as I was going to push it. Jan didn’t have the race won yet, but I was going to take a breath and think.

“Holy cow, Jan’s hooked up,” I yelled at Brian, as he hung out a “10 laps” board. Damn, I didn’t want this to end yet.

Okay, buddy, I thought, here I come again. It was my turn to string together some fastest laps, I was back on his tail.

I got underneath him at the exit of the corner leading onto the pit straight, hoping the marbles weren’t too bad along the wall. Hoping, also, that I could accelerate ahead of him in time for me to get the trash off my tires for the corner. He had to guard against me spinning

and collecting him, either he'd lift off or assume I would.

Down the straight, the telemetry showed I was shifting within fifty RPM of the rev limiter. I had to make my run perfectly. I made it to the end of the straight slightly ahead, by about one car length. As I moved back out toward the racing line, my rear end twitched, that made the corner somewhere between white-knuckle and panic, but I was in the lead again and I hadn't inconvenienced Jan.

Halfway around the last lap, the only thing I was congratulating myself on was the fact that Jan and I had raced each other clean, I was so exhilarated and worn out it made little difference who was leading. In retrospect, that was the correct attitude to have, as my fuel injection went schizo and poured raw gas into the cylinders. The block hydraulic-ed and exploded, creating a nice fire as I aimed for a marshal's stand.

"Detuned engine and it blows up!" I laughed over the radio. "L-O-Fucking-L!"

Punching my belts, I jumped out, directing the firefighters. These guys had their shit together, usually marshals use pressurized water on gasoline, or else spray so much powder it gets in my lungs.

I threw up my hands, I had done all I could. It was unfortunate the engine blew, but that was the only unreasonable failure all year during a race, and it occurred after we had the titles wrapped up, not bad at all.

Jan came by on his cool-down, I rested on his sidepod as we discussed the fire, then he found first and we moved out to continue to the pits. Or tried to, as he stalled the engine! Ah well, we walked instead, throwing our gloves and firesocks to the crowd, laughing at the great race we'd had. Incredibly, we were so far ahead of everyone else that I was classified second, one lap down. Sure enough, as we compared on the podium, our blisters were the same size. Moet, Budweiser, even Suntory felt good over my head, Jan took a stage-dive this time.

Meanwhile, some of the press still didn't get it. Simon was collared by one writer, who had a self-satisfied expression on his face now that Jan had won.

"We would have seen racing like that all summer if you hadn't put Jan on a leash," the guy decided.

"Go fuck yourself," Simon spat, then showed the press members we liked the Olivetti lap chart. Next-to-last lap, there we are, the two fastest laps, three one-thousandths apart.

"Jan had him covered, all right," Simon assured the press with a wink. "That's why he backed off so much."

Brian was repeating to another writer my transmission about how well Jan was doing, Marcel came by and put his own two cents in.

"About ten laps left, right?" Marcel asked, Brian nodded.

"Jan radioed me then, too. He was saying 'God, where is he getting it from? I've tried everything and he's still back there!'"

"Man, that was fun," Jan screamed, as he ran into the press conference and collapsed into a chair. I was already there, laid out on the table. The press was laughing at the two guys up there who needed naps.

"I'm going to ask Ken to put team orders back in for Sao Paulo," I moaned, trying to lift my head.

Two halves, two wholes:

Fifteen hundred invites for our wedding, the Saturday after Thanksgiving, went out in the biggest mass mailing in the Brunswick post office's history. Grace and I soon found that we needed a few more place settings; we were receiving attention from a new class of reporters, society editors from all over Missouri and Georgia, Vanity Fair, New Yorker. TMFuckingZ to make it interesting. Rough problem, we discussed it and decided it would be easier to just invite them in, rather than get confrontational.

While there, we broke ground on the new Pump 'n' Run Truck Stop at the corner of 24 and 63 in Moberly. We had made a killing in diesel sales at Brunswick (location, location, location), and Shell looked to us to develop their truck stops.

I certainly had no problem with that. So as soon as the city council in Moberly accepted bids to five-lane the junction, we bought the old Randolph Drive-in and started clearing land. The speaker poles had just been pulled out by the last night's customers (don't even have to ask, Marie and John were there). Grace and I dug silver shovels into the gravel; Dad dynamited the screen for the television crews.

Next morning, I was in Brunswick buying a USA Today when the mayor came up to me, obviously up to no good.

"Still trying to name a street for me?" I inquired pleasantly.

"Nah. Learned my lesson. What we want to do now is put up a couple of billboards showing you off, y'know, good for business growth."

I wondered who this 'we' was, I reminded him that Peterson's was *the* business in this town. "You've got a captive audience and you sure as hell can't impress anyone with a thirty-foot tall painting looking up my nose."

I was enjoying the argument, but he put on his puppy-dog eyes and I relented.

"Just make sure you don't spend any city money," I directed him. "You send a bill to my daddy, hear? We'll take care of it." He skipped off happy. I thought for a second, did I really say 'Daddy'? 'Hear'? Some Grace must have rubbed off on me, figuratively. Could be worse, I decided as I opened to the sports.

Goddamn Mets had swept a weekend series from the Cardinals, the Cubs of all people were in first. Hockey was starting; I'd have to drag Grace up here for a couple of Blues games this winter...

Back in the sports shorts, "Francis-Honda completed their driver lineup with the signing of Paolo Tambora as co-number one to Jan Van Bemmelen, team owner Peter Francis announced yesterday..."

I chuckled to myself, slapping the paper in my palm as I walked into the Farm and Auto. "Paolo found a way to get back at Ferrari," I related to Dad. The phone in the office

rang, naturally since I picked it up; it was Kevin on the other end.

"You know, if I hit a pigeon on the highway, it'd have a note from you on it," I greeted him, he laughed.

"First thing," I wanted to know, "when did Honda announce?"

"Two days ago. I talked to Francis then, and he said he'd been trying to get a hold of you out of courtesy, but you were out being a business mogul." Or something like that.

"While you're thinking that over, guess who's going to be Paolo's race engineer?" I was glad to see Danilo find his feet so soon. "He said that he liked engineering better than management, anyhow," Kevin added.

I was happy that things were coming together without me. "Okay, here's my statement: If you thought we were dominant this year, just wait. Honda doesn't back morons, and to be brutally honest, Paolo and Jan are the best drivers left. Next year will be a little short on close racing, but I didn't miss it this year."

"Now, off the record," I continued as Kevin snickered, "I'm glad to see Paolo and Danilo bend Ferrari over like this. Couldn't happen to a nicer bunch of back-stabbers."

"Unless your man J-P sticks his nose in it again," Kevin cautioned. "You know, pass a 'safety' regulation to make all British teams owned by a man named Francis strap a lunchbox to the rear wing or something like that."

"If Lacroix tries that, the Yakuza will pay him a visit. I might take my toys over to NASCAR and embarrass him, but Honda would fuck him up for good!"

Paolo made it a point to travel with us to Sao Paulo, rather than with Ferrari or by himself. He came off the plane wearing a Honda gimme cap, which played well with the journalists, not so much back in Italy.

Meanwhile, a group of reporters trailed me across the concourse as I awaited a TAM flight from Miami. Grace alighted, walked over and kissed me. There was a disproportionate amount of catcalls as I took my time breaking it off, Grace responded to the commentary by waving her ring at them and sticking her tongue out.

A hundred years ago, I had won the last hobby stock race I had entered, later on, the last late model, last sprint, and all the way to the final Formula 3000 race in my career. I don't know who brought it to the press' attention, probably Ken, but the time qualifying came around, the media either had me guaranteeing a win, or asking me if I were going to.

"Aww, man, why are you bringing that up?" I asked a clutch of reporters Friday morning. "No matter what happens Sunday, I'll look like an idiot if I don't win."

"Why don't you go down and bug Ferrari?" I whined for show.

"Good point," they answered as one. Since Japan, the main point of discussion when two motorsports journalists got together was what Paolo would do to top Suzuka. Ferrari had tried to fire him after what had happened on the first lap, but Paolo answered through his attorneys, writs in Swiss, Italian and Brazilian courts affirming his right to drive. For how long, though, was up to him...

While I got pole, Jan a tenth behind me, Paolo was starting the off-season early, qualifying twenty-fourth on Friday. He got word back to the teams that usually make up the

back of the grid that he would be on a work slowdown, so their drivers wouldn't go schizo when they were recording times close to the Ferrari.

So, what happened but the rear of the field went crazy on Saturday. There were at least fifteen cars out during the end of qualifying, both Jan and I were glad we'd parked ours.

After a day's worth of pleading from Ferrari's management, Paolo went out with about ten minutes left. As he drove down the pit lane, you could see visible signs of relief from the Ferrari executives. Fine, Paolo had made his point, but soon the honor of Ferrari would be restored. If not the front row, then at least somewhere.

Well, Paolo obviously didn't need this particular race in his resume. He spun the car before he had completed a single lap, in the slowest corner, where nobody goes off. No speed—and no Ferrari on the grid. They had qualified for every Grand Prix they'd entered since the World Championship had been instituted. Paolo strolled leisurely up the pit lane, shaking hands with all of his mechanics before turning his back on the administrators and heading to the Honda suite.

"You guys think Ferrari learned their lesson?" Grace asked us, as we went to a now anticlimactic pole winner's press conference.

"I know Paolo learned his," Jan decided.

When Grace finally let me out of bed on Sunday morning, I looked out the window to find the bright sunshine of the past few days replaced by gate-to-gate overcast.

Grace took a look, said "You're going to get rained on, I'll wager."

"Ducky," I punned. It's rained every year I'd been coming to Sao Paulo. Two races had been shortened, not because cars were aquaplaning off the road (although they were), but because the television net had shorted out!

As the morning wore on, the sky didn't exactly get threatening but I couldn't get a read on the clouds, plus the fact the weather comes in from a different quarter down here. It would be easy to develop an information overload; indeed, that's what most of the other teams had done. Trying all kinds of wet and dry setups, which usually result in two cars that don't handle. It happened to us to a certain extent—Jan and Marcel were convinced a monsoon was coming, while Brian and I were skeptical, or else happy idiots.

"What the hell," I grumbled. "Let's go wreck some cars!"

I found Bill Moore and his laptop between our cars, entering his choices for the engine management program.

"What are we getting today?" I wondered pleasantly.

"You still have that F-150?" he asked. "Well, then you'll be used to the acceleration!"

On the grid before we went out on our formation lap, rather than get in my car, I went over to Jan's. Helmet off, scanning the sky. I noticed most of the people around doing the same thing, like some strange flock of birds looking upward. Each car had a stack of rain tires sitting nearby, portable air guns resting alongside.

I figured on the rain to come at us in bands, if the first didn't totally flood the track, the road would most likely dry before the next. Of course, after some time, the bands would probably get wider and coalesce, and then the fun would begin.

I wasn't going to try and influence Jan's decision; he knew how to drive. And I was far from certain myself, a squall could decide to park over the circuit.

At the five-minute notice, it started drizzling, which set off a panic on the grid. I shook Jan's hand, went over to my car, Brian belted me in. Looking across to Jan, he had asked Marcel for rain tires. Though it was so humid you could chew the air, the warm asphalt was still keeping up with the rain. The only puddles were where the rain dripped off the cars. Flip a coin.

"Keep me on slicks," I told Brian. He looked at me, concerned but not amazed. My choice was within the realm of reasonable decisions, either it would pan out or it wouldn't. Jan had done the same thing, with the same caveats.

The track was as I expected it, on the formation lap I had to note which areas were wet, where I needed to point the car to save my slicks. I had to develop a racing line to connect the dry patches, and to hit the unavoidable spots straight on.

Over the radio, Jan and I reminded each other that, at that second, the track wasn't really great for anyone, and we'd both be looking for different things in the surface, different lines. He'd be swooping to the right as I was going left, for example.

The light went green, he got off cautiously to avoid grinding his rain tires, so I pulled out and immediately went looking for dry spots. The shower had just kissed the pits, but on the back side there were puddles forming.

By the fifth lap, it was no contest in terms of a Hazlett versus everyone else race. About five others had spun off creating a few new chicanes on the back of the course.

Jan was as happy as a clam behind me, staying out of rooster-tail range, patiently watching me dart around. All that crap about 'the leader can drive any line he wants' was just that, crap as far as the two of us were concerned. If he wanted to try and go past, then I'd revert to a traditional line and wish him well in trying to pass.

Ten laps in, ten cars out, I was almost one of them. I hit a patch of oil that I thought was 'just' water, did a 360. No damage, I bump-started the car, and was then able to watch Jan hunt for puddles now. If I got through this race with only one spin, I'd be happy.

Turned out Jan was the unlucky one, so far at least. The rain didn't last, his tires blistered and threw a chunk of tread, so he headed to the pits. That left me with a lead of thirty seconds or so, and that was enough for me for the time being.

When it had rained, the water washed off the rubber laid down all weekend, so the track became more abrasive as it dried, my compound had become inappropriate for the new conditions. Jan had far fresher rubber, and set a string of fastest laps to cut into my lead.

Lap forty, I was on the radio to Brian, telling him of a pretty line of blisters on the tread of my right rear. The car still felt fine, and probably would continue to up until the time the tire blew! Brian told me to give him two laps to get the tire stop laid out. Since it was dry, and no sprinkles, he got another batch of slicks ready, the same as Jan's.

I noticed another batch of clouds coming inland, marginally darker than the first, but nowhere near real rain clouds. Still...I was sure there was some amount of precipitation coming, if I were right, either we all would switch to wets or they'd flag the race. If it was the latter, then the officials would wait until cars were skating into barriers first, then make their

move.

Either way, I didn't want to be in the fence. I needed to be on wets. "Brian," I yelled, "how about rain tires?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" I noted the flippancy in his voice. A few drops began to fall as the guys jumped on my car, quick-in, quick-out, Jan on my ass and me looking for puddles.

There weren't any, at least not yet. I had about ten laps of hard running until my rains would chunk like Jan's did earlier. He could afford to wait; there was the possibility he wouldn't have to pass me if it didn't rain soon.

The shower that started in the pits petered out, I noticed a dry line on the front straight again. No way to slow down, Jan was literally pushing me. Any second now, I was expecting the telltale kick through the steering column telling me that a tread had separated. Where is that damn rain?

One more time, onto the front straight, my heart leapt as rain was bouncing three feet off the pavement! Jan did the only thing he could, peeling off to get wets, as my tires practically sighed with relief. I could now ignore my mirrors and focus on keeping the car straight, running out however many laps that were left. Compared to Jan behind me, though, this was a breeze.

Finally they threw the checker; I fell back in the seat, tired and happy. Not only did we finish one-two, but I had out-thought everyone as well as 'out-skilled' them. Then luck fell my way, that was the capper.

Jan drove a great race, it just happened that I made the right choices at the right times. The year Jan wins the championship, and I'm sure it will be next year, people will talk about six or seven moments when Jan pulled something magnificent out of thin air, or when he threaded a needle through a three-car wreck, or when the team made a tire choice nobody else thought of. But this year was mine.

Up on the podium, I whispered to Jan as the champagne was brought out. Grace was with Ken and Simon, only about three feet below us, beaming up at me. To her, it looked like I was relaxed, walking on the balls of my feet, swaggering as I loosened the cork. A quick look to Ken, who caught it and motioned to Simon. Jan and I were on opposite ends of the podium by now, I heard the squeak of Jan's cork, a nod to each other, then--

Grace screamed as I got her high and Jan went low, totally drenching her as the photographers roared. Her tight-lipped smile dissolved into giggles bursting out the sides of her mouth, then Jan and I did one last stage-dive for old times' sake.

There were a lot of 'last times' coming in rapid succession now, as Jan and I walked to the elevator for my final race winner's interview. Although he'd be at my wedding in a month, it was time for a farewell of sorts.

"Thanks for being with me the past two years," I said as I embraced him. "Both I and the team wouldn't have been this good without you, not to mention how much fun we all had."

"It has been an honor to watch you drive," he replied. "Can you believe it? We made history."

"Of a sort," I chuckled. "Not that you'll need it, but good luck next year."

“You too. Amongst all the circle jerks,” he suppressed a laugh.

The scene around us resembled the last day of school; the mechanics were selling off jackets, clothing, stickers, even wings and bodywork off the cars. What the hell, Lacroix had rendered it all obsolete, anyway. Might as well reduce the weight for Hazlett to take back to London.

I laughed ironically. Francis, now, and I was officially an ex-employee of Ken Hazlett. As Grace and Jan talked quietly and tried to look away, it was down to Ken and me in the garage.

“Mister Hazlett, sir,” I began, shaking his hand, “Thank you for the opportunity to put your name on the constructors’ title.”

“Cut the crap, Don,” he scolded slightly, smiling. “You kicked ass, I just gave you the shoes.”

He looked around. “Hell of a way to get out, I guess. You and Jan, all the guys. This was the best year of my career. Because it was with my friends.”

I carried on: “When they talk of me in the future, the fact that they’ll mention your name along with mine makes me feel good. It was an honor to be associated with you. This,” as I grasped his hand harder, “is for all we accumulated together.”

“And this,” as the handshake was replaced by a hug, “is for the way you looked after me and my family after Hockenheim. I know it was hard on you. Thanks for taking charge, I’ll never forget it.” We both were crying by now.

“Don, anyone would have done it,” but that wasn’t the point.

“You need anything,” I said, “just call. See you at Atlanta.”

Grace came by after a while. “Jan told me that he heard WeatherNation wants you to do their forecasts,” she told me. I held her, the wet puppy smell overpowered by the scent of champagne. She was drenched, her hair curling into ringlets, her nipples showing through her blouse.

“I’d really like to lick that bubbly off your body,” I said, nuzzling her.

“Mmm. I’ll let you, too.” We walked the front straight, the rain was still coming down, but it wasn’t pelting, more like a blanket.

“You sad?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied profoundly, a little dazed by the fact that I was leaving this world. “I know I wasn’t going to do this forever, but...time’s up.”

“Change of scenery, that’s all,” Grace said, then began laughing sardonically. “You’ll be bouncing off concrete rather than guardrails.”

I was met by a mob of reporters and television crews when we finally returned to Atlanta. I went out of my way to assure them that I wasn’t viewing my move as a vacation (“Guys, meet my vacation,” as Grace held up her ring finger again). In terms of my profession, I had a lot to learn, un-learn and re-learn. “If I don’t get upside down, then I’ll be happy,” was how I put it.

I had to laugh when a NASCAR compliance rep came by Decker’s shop for some administrative details, one of the things he brought up were the dimensions of the yellow

rookie stripe on the back bumper of my car.

The guy looked at us funny as Decker and I shook our heads and laughed. “You have to understand the year I went through,” I explained.

“Hell, guy,” Decker clapped the man on the shoulder, “we’ll just paint the whole car yellow!” And that’s just what he did, shooting the paint himself. Then, in blue, he stenciled **‘Danger: European Dilettante On Board’** on the rear spoiler.

“That’ll work,” the NASCAR man nodded, smiling. “Good to have you here, Don—you’ll have fun on Sunday.”

A lot of the European press was coming over for this race; I spent a lot of time on the phone arranging hotel reservations and track credentials for them. When they got to Hartsfield, I chauffeured them to their hotels. Grace thought it was funny, six months ago she was driving me around, now I knew the expressways and detours eight ways from Sunday.

My belongings came from London, the two of us started garage sale/keep piles. Before I knew it, Friday morning had arrived, time to drive to the track and start my new job.

I drew fifth qualifying spot, I was so ignorant of things that I didn’t know if that was a good slot. With it, I got twentieth fastest time, more a testament to Decker’s chassis than to me, really. One of the other Ford drivers took my Fusion out, pronounced it to be a really good car, not a bowser by any stretch.

“Twentieth is okay,” I told the reporters. “Car felt good, I felt good. It’s possible that I could have loaded up on diet pills, scared myself silly and maybe gotten...nineteenth, I suppose.”

I practiced the car, looked around, and asked questions. A lot of information was volunteered to me, then it was Sunday morning. I woke up on a raceday in my own bed, more or less for the first time in years, then we helicoptered from Coca-Cola’s office to the track. “Hell, I like this already,” Grace shouted over the engine noise.

Naturally, there was a crowd around our transporter, tons of Shell people, Sola Stella, Budweiser, Ford had a space in their suite for Ken. A lot of European Ford corporate types used this opportunity to say hey to their friends and bosses in the U.S., it was a pleasant, company-picnic type of atmosphere. I hated to break it up, but I had a race...

I had made it clear to any driver who asked, that at the start I was going to stay high, anyone who wanted to pass wouldn’t have a problem with me. I sure as hell wasn’t trying to win the race in the first hundred miles, and most likely not in the last four hundred, either! This was a long test session, as far as I was concerned, I wanted to drive some laps.

Almost by accident, I got up to eighteenth by the second lap, then fell slowly back to around twenty-fifth as the laps clicked off. I had halfway expected for a yellow to be thrown in the first few laps, I hoped that I wasn’t the cause.

Instead, the race went green until most of the cars in front of me had gone in for their first pit stop. Though it wasn’t by brilliant driving, I was up to seventh by the time someone blew an engine and brought out a yellow. If I had actually been racing, I’d go ahead and pit now. But since I had nothing to lose, I decided to run as long as the fuel pressure lasted and see how far up I could get. I called Decker; he sort of had the same idea, and went over the restart procedure with me.

The rest of the field went in, I was nominally the race leader. We went green; I went high to let the cars with new rubber go beneath me. However, no one did for two laps; apparently my tires weren't as bad as I'd expected.

Finally, Decker talked me down the pit lane. I stopped just fine, four tires and two cans of gas in fifteen seconds and I didn't stall the engine. A complete success, as far as I was concerned.

Because I stopped under green, I was the better part of two laps down, in thirtieth place. As you can see, if I were actually trying to win the race or get points, my decisions had been totally wrong.

With about forty laps left, someone got sideways in front of me, I tried to cut down to the inside of the back straight to avoid. My tires didn't really agree with my decision, I pirouetted down the track, not hitting anything or anyone but bringing out a yellow as I crawled back to the pits.

"I've never seen a car spin like that before," Decker allowed as I got new tires. "I can tell you haven't been on an oval in years. You tried to correct too many times."

He was right, but "It worked, didn't it?" I laughed, holding out my hands as my car was let down.

"Yeah, I suppose." He smiled as I rolled out to finish the race. I wound up three laps down in twentieth; I don't think I embarrassed myself, as both the race winner and the guy who won the championship had spun as well.

In our pit, you'd think that I'd won the race. Grace climbed in the car before I could get out, hugging me in front of the MRN and FOX reporters. The crew couldn't douse me with Gatorade, so they poured it all over the car instead!

The media asked the usual "how does it feel" questions, I tried to give honest responses.

"Allowing that I've never driven a three and a half hour race before, I don't feel bad." A cloudy day in the sixties didn't hurt either.

"How about that spin?"

"Well, I'm glad that it didn't alter the result of the race, everyone needed a pit stop, I was glad I could help out. I wanted to be as invisible as a stock car could be, learning and staying out of the way. I think I accomplished that."

"What about the actual racing?"

"Not to brag, but in Formula One, we were out front most of the time. I didn't actually do a lot of racing; I didn't know how much I missed it. I hope every race is like this!"

"Maybe, Don, maybe," they chortled.

"I noticed a Chevy won the race, and another got the championship," I told them. "I'm hoping to do something about that next year."

I actually kept the reporters around longer than they expected, I was in such a good mood. Decker had choppered out already, he had short-track and superspeedway cars built, I'd be in Richmond tomorrow testing, and try Talladega again later in the week.

"By the way, I've talked to Decker about testing," I explained to Grace. The track was mostly deserted; a few barbecue parties were the only noises around as we walked the front

straight. "He juggled the track time and flight reservations, I figure we can knock off for a day and a half for our wedding."

That got a laugh out of her, "If that's the case, let's get a head start on consummating."

With me in my tuxedo and Grace in her wedding dress, we presented an incongruous sight on the loading dock of the Coca-Cola plant, in contrast to trailers and stacks of pallets.

"You always bring me places and sneak me in through the loading dock," Grace observed. She was laid back against me, my arms around her tummy, as we watched about twenty cousins of mine doing burnouts in the parking lot. Slush and gravel sprayed over the score of Caddys and Lincolns parked out front. On this of all weeks, Thursday night Moberly had received an early snowstorm. By Friday morning, there were eight inches of wet snow on the ground, that's why my half-finished parking lot was in the condition it was.

"Did you do this just for me?" she asked Friday. "Because, to be honest, I'd just as soon you hadn't."

"What's the problem, you don't like a little snow?"

"I suppose to you this is just a little, but all we get back home is freezing rain."

"But you fly all over, you've never seen this much?"

"Looking out an airport window is a lot better than being in the way of it."

I got her interested in the snowfall enough to go out with me and make snowpeople in Marie's yard. Then there was a parade downtown; the two of us rode in a Mustang convertible, dodging snowballs along the six-block parade route.

We had driven Grace's Accord up from Atlanta. Moore and Holcomb from Ford saw it and gave us shit for driving Brand X. That got Grace to thinking, Friday afternoon after rehearsal she mentioned that Robert, Bill, and Robin "wanted you to buy me a new car for my wedding present."

"Remind me to put anti-freeze in their punch," I smirked. Really, it was no big deal; her present to me was the plane tickets for Hawai'i in her purse. So I grabbed a checkbook and we gingerly drove to Moberly Ford to make some salesperson happy. Curiously, she produced the title for the Accord from her purse. Just a coincidence...

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, as we followed a sand truck into town. Since I was a Fusion driver now, Holcomb had a street version waiting for me back in Atlanta.

"I ain't telling," she teased, though I think she didn't know yet, either.

The last place anyone expected to find me the afternoon before my wedding was at a car dealer. I chatted with the lone salesman, everyone else had taken off to watch Nebraska beat the crap out of Iowa on television. He unscrewed the Georgia plate off the Honda as I vacuumed out the interior. Grace came by, smiling and crooking her finger at me.

Here was a violently red F-250 dually super-cab, 6.9 turbo diesel, chrome rear bumper, clearance lights on the roof, fog lights, running boards. If Moberly had a pimp, he'd drive a truck like this. But I counted about ten pickups just like this one lined alongside.

"Are you on drugs?" I asked, looking in the cab, thankful it was an automatic, at least. I remembered Grace talking about freezing rain in Georgia, reminding her that "these things are death traps on ice."

“Then I’ll stay home,” she said matter-of-factly. “Or else I’ll get the professional to drive.”

“Okay, but you’ll have to learn how to chew tobacco,” I said, as I wrote out the check. She drove back home.

When we pulled up, Holcomb was talking with John. Robin’s jaw hit the driveway, as John choked back a laugh. I shrugged my shoulders in response, but really I was glad Grace got what she wanted. Daniel came out and stuck a DeKalb Seed cap on her head.

Friday night, Grace and I were on a barge on the opposite shore of the Grand River, shooting off about ten thousand bucks of industrial fireworks. Just like with the billboards, the town had wanted to spend some green on me; again I told them not to think about spending any tax money.

“Just call me the fucking Sultan of Brunei,” I laughed, signing checks right and left. It was worth the money, all the sulfur and explosions and happy kids, and I was in the middle of it.

However, the day had worn me out, so I didn’t protest too much when Grace informed me about five to midnight that I was spending my last unmarried night in my folks’ spare bedroom, she’d see me tomorrow.

“I didn’t think you were much for tradition,” I protested out of habit, as I tried to get under her sweater on Marie’s front porch.

“Just this one,” she smiled, wriggling out from my grasp. “You’ll need to rest up. Besides, your hands are like ice. Now go, before you turn into a pumpkin!”

So we got married. No dramas, no surprises. Grace was so beautiful, lots of shoulders and cleavage, capped with a huge smile. Like she belonged there.

After Carol’s husband Dorian finished officiating the ceremony, Grace threw her veil up before I could get to it and French-kissed me for about thirty seconds. As our families and guests cheered, Grace leaned in close to me and whispered in a low voice, “I guarantee that was the worst kiss you’ll ever get from me.”

The reception was full of people glad to see us succeed, lots of laughing and handshakes. Our families soon pushed their tables together, Ken and Robert Decker compared notes on the totalitarianism of various sanctioning bodies, Jan and Carol, who were our attendants, roamed the warehouse, people-watching.

“At least we won’t run out of sodas,” I remarked, as my hands slid further up the front of her dress, feeling the bottom of her bosom swell out. She sighed, it was a cool night, and my actions made her shiver.

She drew my arms into her tighter, her breasts pushing up against me, her beautiful cleavage drawing me downward. This time, under these circumstances, it felt appropriate to be so swept away by her presence, her body, just the fact that I was hers and she mine.

The *second* time I teared up that evening was when I encountered the huge floral display that served as the centerpiece of the head table, with a card from Valérie and Marlena Rittmann. Wow.

Jan and Carol, in their capacities as best man and maid of honor, announced from the stage that the band was returning in about fifteen minutes. They’d be playing country and

western music, “So you can ‘Cotton-Eyed Joe’, whatever that is, and I don’t want to know,” was how he put it.

“You were going to teach me how,” Grace reminded me.

“I’d rather slow-dance you until one of us gets pregnant,” I whispered between kisses.

She sighed and smiled. “C’mon. Marie told me we could change in your office.” We walked down the hall; John and Marie were wandering around there. We said hi, Marie slipped something into Grace’s hand, but it passed on through my consciousness.

“I forgot to ask, how was your shower?” I wondered, unlocking the door and turning on the light.

“Well, what do you get the girl who can buy everything she wants?” she asked rhetorically. “Sex toys, that’s what!” She noticed the look on my face, and quickly added, “Relax, they’re back in Atlanta!”

“How about you,” she retorted, “Which titty bar did you guys hit?”

“Are you kidding? I wasn’t in the mood to celebrate any aspect of being a bachelor, not even its passing. I was in such a hurry to be your hubby.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. I turned around and noticed she hadn’t gotten changed yet, at least not completely. She was sitting on the edge of my desk, shoes off, headpiece lying on the couch, her breasts freed from her dress.

“And what’s this?” I wondered out loud. I got a little dizzy, my blood heading somewhere else.

“This,” she informed me as she hiked up her dress, “is another wedding tradition I believe in.” How about that, she forgot her underwear this morning.

“Passed down for generations, I’d wager,” I smirked. “I’ll be hog-tied.”

“Maybe later,” she shot back. “Didn’t you think it was strange, how I held my legs together when you were pulling off my garter?”

“Didn’t notice, I’m sorry.”

“No problem. But, I just knew your mom was going to look at the wrong time.” She giggled, “it was worth it, don’t you think?”

“God. But what about someone coming by? I mean, John and Marie were just here.”

“Actually, they were sweeping the area,” she explained. “They’re at the entrance to the warehouse, to deter anyone else from sightseeing.”

“How did you get them to go for this?” I wondered, as she not so gently unzipped me. “Bribe ‘em?”

“It was more like a trade agreement,” she clarified, holding up a set of car keys. “I had something she wanted.”

“Our brand-new truck!”