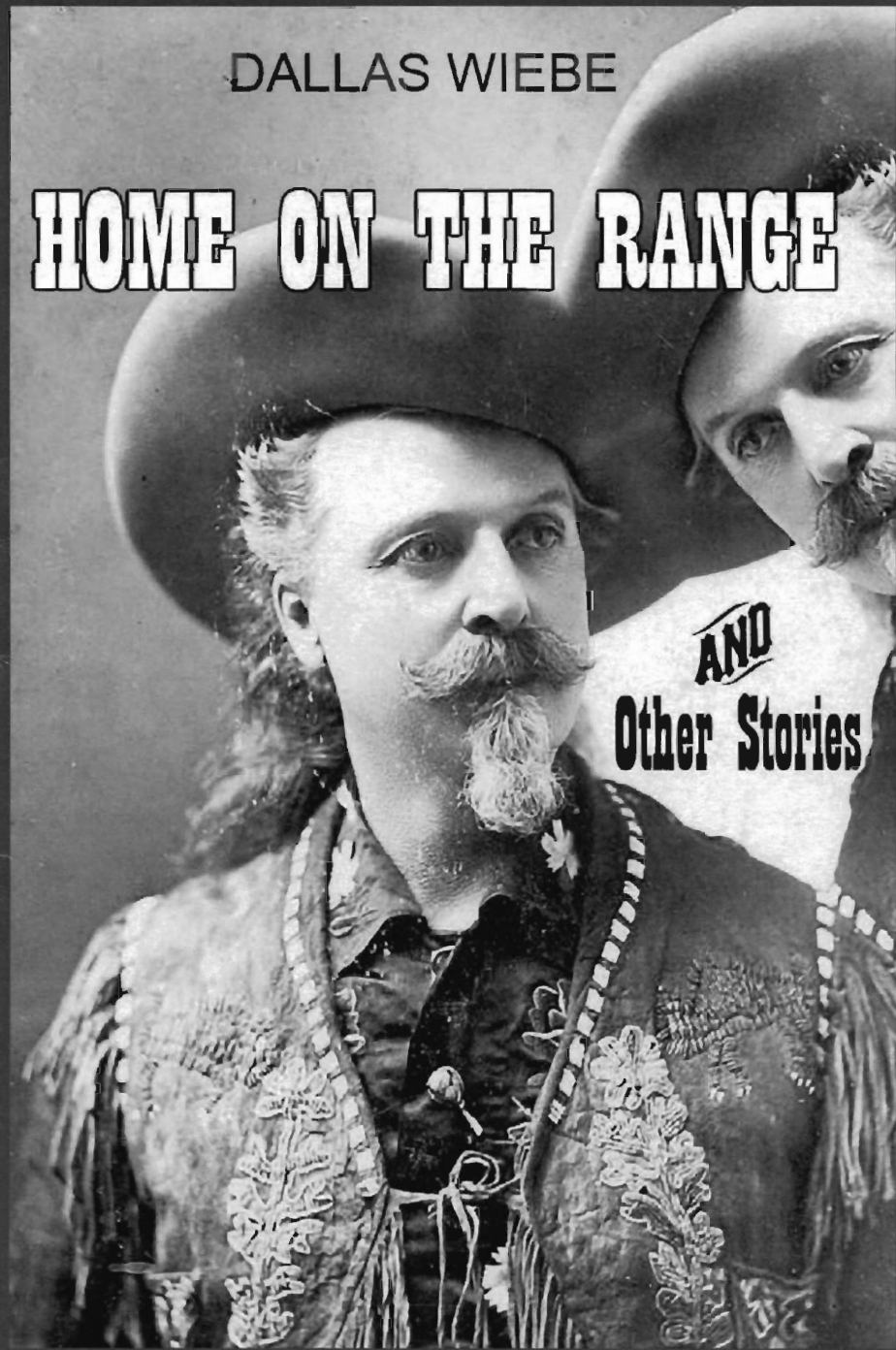


DALLAS WIEBE

# HOME ON THE RANGE

AND  
Other Stories



# HOME ON THE RANGE

*AND* OTHER STORIES



## DALLAS WIEBE

Obscure Publications  
2008

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*In Memory of Dallas Wiebe*  
*January 9, 1930 – May 1, 2008*

## Home on the Range

### I.

A man with long silver hair and a long silver beard is crawling through the high grass near the Solomon River. He is crawling slowly through the dusk of late April toward a great, dark buffalo bull that is grazing near a wallow. The bull is off by himself. The herd is in a slough near the river where the grass is deep and there is a little water in a hole. The man with the silver hair and silver beard has a silver buckle on his belt. The nails in his boots are silver and the rifle he pushes out in front of him is made of silver. In the tall grass, the man crawls on. There is no noise as he crawls up to kill the great bull in order to feed the men building the railroad.

As he crawls, the moon rises. It shines into the tall grass and onto the silver-haired hunter. Buffalo Bill is outlined by his silver trappings, his silver locks and the silver bullets stuck into his belt. He wants the big bull dead. Now. He wants that great hump for his din-din. He wants the splendid hide for his hanky-panky winter. He wants the tongue and the eyes for his flea-flicking dogs. He wants him dead. Now. He wants to clear the plains of his kind so that the railroad can go choo-choo. When he gets close enough he will raise his rifle, with the beams around and upon it, to his shoulder, pull back the hammer, squeeze the

hairy trigger and go bang-bang until the great, dark, buffalo bull falls willy-nilly to his fuddy-duddy knees, bleeding from his tum-tum.

Buffalo B stops. He thinks he hears a voice. He is right. The big bull hears it too. He raises his head and shuffles his rump around so that his dark, bulbous left eye is looking right at two silver eyebrows. The bull backs sideways away and then jogs down to the herd where he muscled and butts away. Buffalo B is so pissed he can't stand it. He's tracked that bull for hours. First he got downwind, dropped to his hands and knees. Then he crawled through snakes, mosquitoes and kangaroo rats. He came silent through the high grass. He readied to cock without sound. He readied to aim, noiseless in the silver light. Then came the voice. Then went the bull. "Dagnabbit," he says as he stands up in the chin-high grass, "who made that noise anyhow?" When he turns around to go back to his plump horse, he sees a brick house with white trim. A light is shining from one of the back windows. Buffalo B crosses the street, goes down a driveway and sidles up to the sash. He looks in the window. He sees a kitchen and there is a skinny lady leaning against a white gas stove. Her hand is over her mouth and she is talking. It is she scaring the bull away. It is she talking and making all that blasted noise as she tells something to the man who is sitting on a tall stool by a breakfast bar. He is quiet as he sips his Budweiser. Buffalo Bill, silver and all, stares into the window and listens. He can't decide whether to plug her or not. Let the dogs gnaw on her maybe. He stares at her gut as the voice rattles off his silver eyeballs.

“I was so proud of myself. And so was Fischbein. God, he was proud of me because I figured it out all by myself. I talked and talked and answered and answered until I found it myself. There I sat in that big black chair and, one day, said it on my own.”

The man said, “I don’t understand all this. What the hell are you trying to tell me?”

“Trying to tell you? I went to a psychiatrist, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. You don’t know how hard it is for me to say all this. You don’t know. But tonight I made up my mind I was going to tell you. I sat there in the Busy Beet, had a few smart drinky-pooos and decided I was going to come straight over here and tell you all about it. I just decided right there.”

“So what’s such a big deal about going to a psychiatrist? You told me you’d been there before.”

“No, no, dear heart. This was last fall and last winter when you and I weren’t seeing each other. The whole thing cost \$3000 and Herman is still paying for it. He thinks I was just depressed. He doesn’t know it had anything to do with you. I just had to do something. I just couldn’t understand why we couldn’t get along. My roommate kept patting me on the back and saying, ‘There, there,’ and now, God, is he ever paying for it.”

“Hell, Thelma, I can or could have told you why we couldn’t get along. And for a hell of a lot less money. You treated me like shit. For Christ’s sake, you attacked me constantly. You belittled me. You ridiculed me publicly. You slandered me. You denigrated me. You cursed me. You accused me of everything you could think of. You threw shit in my face whenever we got together. You



threatened to castrate me. Why in all hell should I take all that? I did the only thing I could. I just went away.”

“You know, you hurt me. You hurt me going away. And I just had to know why. You know I can’t stand not knowing why things happen like they do.

“And do you know how exhausting it is to go to a psychiatrist twice a week? One hour twice a week. And was Fischbein unrelenting. He kept after me and kept after me. After our sessions I’d be completely exhausted. Do you know how tiring all that is?”

“No, I don’t. I’ve never been to a psychiatrist. I think they’re a bunch of shit. And overpriced too. My God, Thel, I’m around those creeps all the time. I know what they are. I wouldn’t tell them the length of my turds.”

Unblinking silver eyes at the window.

“They’ve done me a lot of good. I told you I had such bad nightmares once. I’d wake up screaming. Terrible. A psychiatrist got me out of that.”

“What’d he say? What’d he say?”

“My mother.”

Silver lips open.

Thelma turns her back and snivels into her right palm. She bends her left knee. Her right buttock drops a few inches down the pant leg of her red and white striped hip huggers. Flared and washed too often, faded and flaking, they sag at the crotch. Her oily sandals coil around her toes as she lifts her left foot. Her star-spangled blouse crawls out further from under her black, hairy belt. She bumps against one of the gas handles on the stove. Tom hears it click on and smells the gas rise. He gets up, turns it off and

goes back to his stool by the breakfast counter. Thelma moves to the sink, looks in, her back to the other one.

Buffalo Bill spits on the asphalt driveway. “Gawdamighty,” he says to his red horse. “Look at that one.”

“O.K. So you went last fall and winter to a psychiatrist. It cost your husband \$3000 and he’s still trying to pay it off. And all this had something to do with me, Professor Thomas Jackson Turner, Ph.D., historian, philanderer. Like what?”

“Like what what?”

“What’d it all have to do with me?”

“I didn’t know who you were or are.”

“Holy shit, Thelma, we’ve rubbed bellies hundreds of times. We’ve licked, sucked, fingered, talked, stroked, bit, everything. We’ve been as intimate as any two people can be and you don’t know who I was? Or who I am?”

Buffalo Bill slips a quivering silver bullet into his silver rifle.

“That’s right. I didn’t know who you were. You see, Tom, it’s all up here.” She points to her head, her creepy right index finger pointing like a limp pistol toward her right temple. Tom looks up. He looks along her flat butt, along her tired waist, up her crooked spine, up her freckled nape and into the straight wires of hair pointing straight down all the way around. And he feels a little tickle in his upper right temple and a little tickle in the upper left temple. His back aches from slumping off the stool by the breakfast bar.

Buffalo Bill scratches his silver ass with his silver left hand. The night air and the insects are making him raunchy. Randy bullets tingle in his belt.

“There were some light moments when I was there. We both saw ‘M\*A\*S\*H’ and we talked about that. I told him once that you wouldn’t even speak to me and he laughed and said, ‘Well, would you speak to anyone who’d treated you the way you treated him?’ I had to agree and we laughed about that a little. But mostly it was all seriousness. I told him all about you. Everything I knew. And Fischbein was very interested in your background and how we met. He knows all about you. Maybe even more than you know about yourself.” Turner’s back feels as if it were swelling. Sharp spines seem to be groping off the backbone by his chest. He feels the spines pushing out and up. He wants to hit her in the mouth.

Buffalo Bill looks away from the window. Fireflies and bats fly by night. The moon gleams on his upright rifle.

Instead. Instead of charging and hitting, Turner to Thelma. “I hate to ask this, but I guess it’s what you want. Who was I?”

Thelma snivels into both palms. Walks to the gas handles. Keeps her back to the man. “Oh God, Tom, you just don’t know how humiliating this is.”

“For whom?”

“For me, of course. Don’t make fun of me. You don’t know how difficult this is.”

“For whom?”

“For me! God damn it. For me.”

“All right, then. Why don’t you just cut out the soap opera and say what you came to say. This is getting silly. Who was I?”

Thelma throws herself against the wall and buries her face in her arms and sobs out, “You were my stepfather.”

Buffalo Bill wets his left index finger and holds it up to see which way the wind is blowing. He is downwind and knows what to do.

The tickling in Turner’s temples changes to something else. A discomfort, like when pimples swell. A constant, necessary pressure from the inside. Tom feels for the lumps. His back hurts from his waist to his head. He wants to run. The spines are getting bigger and longer. His hair lies back on his neck. His shoulders itch. His nose begins to swell between his eyes.

The grass waves to Buffalo Bill. It is good carpet for his work. The great plains must go. His silver eyes glint in the moonlight.

“Why me? Why me, for God’s sake? What’d I ever do to deserve that? I’m not your stepfather. I’m me, Dr. Thomas Jackson Turner, assistant professor of history. I was born November 1, 1940, in Celina, Ohio. Legitimate. My parents now are both dead and buried but I do have a birth certificate. No brothers or sisters. One arthritic aunt, mother’s side. My inoculation record is up-to-date. I have a complete physical examination once a year. A.B. at the University of Cincinnati. M.A. at Columbia. Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin. Doctoral dissertation on wild west circuses. Vita sheet and bibliography available without cost and immediately. Dossier in order and ready. Why me? Is that why you were so nasty all the time? Well, it figures.

Some things do fall into place. But why me? Why'd you select me to be your stepfather? Did you have a love affair with him after your mother died, or something?"

"Oh no, no."

"Why me? Do I look like him?"

"You're built like him."

"You mean that just because I happen to be built like your stepfather that made me him?"

"I don't know. You don't understand. It's all up here." Again the finger to the temple. Turner's temples throb with pressure. His back and neck bend under it. He thinks of wallowing in dirt and mud in order to cleanse himself, to relieve the pain.

Buffalo Bill wipes off his boots with his silver left hand. Nails shine in the night. Silver beams illuminate the heavy dew.

"Listen. Enough already. Did it work?"

"Did what work?"

"The psychiatry. You said you were proud of yourself and that Fischbein was proud of you. Sounds like something happened. You did quit going, I take it."

"Oh yes. I quit sometime in January."

"That was when you went to bed with me again."

"Right. That's right."

"Well, I guess then that if everything ended up all right it was worth the money."

"Tom, I love you so much and I just had to know what was happening."

"Are you saying that I'm not your stepfather anymore?"

"Yes. And I know who you are."

Buffalo Bill drops to his hands and knees and crawls toward the front door of the house. Tulips and daffodils tickle his nose.

Turner's temples ache to break open. His back swells to let him lean lower over the counter. The spiny tendrils reach out and make his back into a paralyzed lump. The swelling forehead and nose make it difficult to focus his eyes. He stares out of his deep brown eyes at the back strap, visible through the stars and blue, of Thelma's white brassiere. He wants to bathe and shave. He wants to run into the mountains, but he says instead, "I don't know who I am or what I am. I never have. And I doubt that anyone understands himself or others. The psychiatrists get you to accept their clichés, their silly simplifications, and you think you've achieved understanding and are therefore cured. Jesus, it's shit. Don't you know, Thel, the mystery of man? We're all very complicated. We don't even know the physiology of the brain very well, much less consciousness and dreams. We're full of paradoxes and contradictions. We play games with others and with ourselves and all that often not even knowing that we're doing it. We deceive ourselves and others with the best of intentions. That's what all our study is about. What the hell is man, anyway? If the psychiatrists had the answer we could all quit and go drinking. Sorry. I was preaching. But, pray tell me, since you know, who am I?"

Her back is still turned. She looks up, puts her hands on her flat hips. She turns around under the light. She is smiling. She walks around Tom, puts her arms around his chest from behind. Her breasts straddle the lump on his back. She lays her weary head on his right shoulder.

Buffalo Bill crawls through the grass and the small trees in front of the house. He crawls through mice, ants, rats and dog turds that grease him on his way.

“Oh Tom,” Thelma says, “I was so proud of myself and Fischbein was so proud of me when I realized it myself. He didn’t have to tell me. I discovered it myself. All by myself, sitting there, exhausted, in that big, black leather chair. All by my smart self I figured it out and we both knew I was right.”

“Thelma?”

“Yes, love.”

Buffalo Bill opens the front door and crawls in, quiet. The kitchen light outlines the hunched man on the stool and the creature on his back. He sees the splayed feet on the rung, the oily sandals on the floor.

Tom lowers his head, turns sideways, looks out of his right eye at her and snorts, “Who am I?”

Thelma cuddles tight. Raises her mouth to his right ear, pushes aside the thick, brown hair and says, “Why, you’re you.”

Behind Turner, Buffalo Bill’s silver eyes roll up from the tired thighs of Thelma to the scalp of the plain man who slumps over his beer. Buffalo Bill raises his silver rifle and cocks it. He aims quietly. He fires a dandy silver bullet right between the teeny-weeny horns of that dark head.

## II.

The buffalo man first appeared in Cincinnati at the Carthage Fair along with the alligator lady, the fat lady, the skinny man, the Siamese twins, the sword-swallower, the

fire-eater and the inside-out girl. Out on the wooden stage in front of the tent, the announcer called them off, promised thrills and genuine live exhibits of what some people are like. Promised unforgettable sights. Promised more than anyone could expect for fifty cents. He promised to show them, for the first time in the tri-state area, a man who grew buffalo horns and a real hump on his back. A man who grew shaggy black hair on top of his head and down over his shoulders. A man who grew a buffalo beard. A man whose hands and feet hardened and split, whose shoulders lifted, whose rump dropped, whose tail grew, whose eyes turned deep brown and grew a four-pointed black star in each one. For fifty cents, it was all promised. And it was guaranteed that those who were skeptical, those who thought it all make-up, those who scoffed at mysteries could, if they wished, or if they dared, touch the horns, stroke the rump, feel the wet, wide nose and see the buffalo man run his tongue up each nostril. Guaranteed that the buffalo man would recite one of his own poems to show how much he was still human.

The first night, ten curious women entered the tent and touched the horns. The second night fifty anxious women came and the word was out. The third night a mob came to find the magic. Three hundred pushing, angry women came to see, to pay fifty cents, to enter, to crowd up and touch the real horns that grew from the head of the buffalo man. The fourth night there was a riot and the police were called in to control the mob. Many of the women in the crowd were back a second and third time because the buffalo man was real and more. The word came to them. The word went out



that there was the sign of the horns, the hump, the hoofs—but human as he sat on his chair and recited poetry.

On the fifth and last day of the fair, Thelma came with a lunch, a six-pack of Budweiser and a buddy to be first in line. That was at 6:00 P.M., even though the first show didn't start until 7:30, because she didn't want to stand in line behind all those other tacky women and then have to fight her way up to the main attraction. More important, she wanted to be the first to see and report in Cincinnati bars what was to be seen and that it was all a fake. With police controls of the crowd, she figured that if she was first in line she'd be out by 7:35 and could get in a good long evening of drinking in the Busy Beet. She figured that if she ran out of beer while standing in line she could always send her buddy Folsom out for more. He could hold the lunch and she'd hold the conversation. She could tell him all about her troubles while he'd giggle, caress, finger. She figured her buddy would entertain her until she could laugh off the dummies who got taken in by freak shows.

So when the spiels for the other freaks ended, she was first in line to see the buffalo man who sat up on a platform in a blue wooden chair behind a curtain. The alligator lady, the fat lady, the skinny man, the Siamese twins, the sword-swallower, the fire-eater and the inside-out girl all retreated to their hidden lives. Having been seen for only five to ten minutes a day, they fled to their trailers where, in solitude, they were no longer freaks, where their normality was the only one present. They didn't stay around to hear the barker call out the last of the freaks.

The red burlap curtain opened. The buffalo man turned his right eye to the crowd, looked down to see the

long line of ladies winding around and around the tent and out the door. He looked down to see the ladies quarreling over places in line. He looked down to see guards with clubs, mace and pistols. He heard the sighing and griping. He heard the squabbling for position. He turned his left eye to the mob. He smelled the hot sweat, the sawdust, the cheap perfumes. He licked the spittle from his lips and tasted the spermy palms of yesterday. He looked from his left eye to see a thin lady, first in line, dressed in red and white striped hip huggers that flared over her greasy sandals. He looked down to see her blue blouse covered with white stars that covered her drooping shoulders. He looked down to see her burning brown eyes, her hairy nostrils, her black hair belt, her rubbery waist. Her red face. Her black hair short and pointing straight down all around. Her corkscrew fingers covering her mouth. Behind her stood a thin man with an open empty brown bag in his hands.

The buffalo man sat in a skyblue, wooden chair. The chair was covered with little, silver moons. Over his head, a large yellow globe of light turned slowly. On it were painted the signs of the zodiac. Behind him was a large black curtain. On the curtain, painted in gold, and running in all directions, even crisscrossing each other, were the sayings of the buffalo man. Gilded graffiti that he could bellow or snort to the quivering ladies in the small towns of Ohio. "The joint connects two things." "Anything that has a beginning and an end is not infinite." "Kick sleeping dogs until they move out of the way." "When the turtle blinks, unbind your body." "Lambs have the grace to suck kneeling." "Cleanliness is next to nothing." "Thalarctos

maritimus!” “A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool’s back.” “The more flesh the more worms.” “For when men get their horns again, they will delight to go uncovered.” “For the shaving of the beard was an invention of the people of Sodom to make men look more like women.” “To revile a man you don’t need a preliminary draft.” “Eros is where it is.” “Dasypus novemcinctus.” Other sayings disappeared around the edges of the curtain or disappeared into the jumble of golden words on the curtain.

The buffalo man sat in his wooden chair, his hooped forelimbs resting on the arms of the chair. His hind legs spread apart to display his male genitalia, the prick that ran up his belly to a hairy tip, the massive scrotum dangling over the front edge of the chair. His tail was bent out to his right side. His winter coat was beginning to form and a heavy mantle of thick, brown-black hair covered the top of his head, his neck, his shoulders, his forelimbs and ran to his waist. His ears were barely visible in the matted coat. His curved horns glistened in the turning yellow light. His eyes glowed out of the hair. His mandarin beard waggled as he turned his head from side to side to see the crowd.

He turned his head to the right and looked out of his left eye. His head, sunk beneath his shoulders, lowered even more. He pointed his mouth toward the crowd and, while sticky saliva yo-yo’ed down from his mouth and beard, he recited his poem.

## Final Mad

Black cherries are the food  
Of the chocolate bird  
That sings in the wood  
Around the world.

His song is long and wide.  
He sings maladies  
And flies on his side  
To the ladies.

If you listen to the moon  
And touch the sun,  
He'll tell you his name.  
He'll cry up one.

If you pluck his tail,  
He'll wobble along  
With joy into his fall,  
Into his dying.

Black cherries are the food  
Of the dead bird.  
Eat them with blood.  
Spit pits on the earth.

The charmed ladies watched the little webs of slobber, silver in the light, shining and mobile, as they slowly stretched toward the floor. The chilled ladies crossed their arms and held their breasts. The chaste ladies shuffled

against each other and the guards watched for trouble. Folsom remarked over Thelma's shoulder that he didn't understand a word of it. "What'd he say anyway?" Thelma stared at the split bones of the buffalo's hands and said, "I wasn't listening. I'm not interested in his verse."

The buffalo man dropped from his chair onto his four legs. He clambered down the steps, his shoulders, the heavy forequarters, lifting high, his back legs and thin hindquarters missing the steps and clacking against boards and planks of the platform. He plodded across the sawdust-covered grass to the wooden counter in front of the line of women. Before he lifted his head and laid it on the boards, he pointed his nose up as far as he could and gave a long, plangent bellow. The women shivered. Hugged themselves tighter and lifted their nipples higher. The tent was all silence. When the buffalo man put his head on the counter, the master of ceremonies signaled by raising his cane that the touching could begin.

Thelma tossed her last Budweiser can onto the sod floor of the tent, stepped forward and took hold of both horns. She rocked the head from side to side as if to loosen the short, curved spikes. When she stopped, she was afraid of something. The buffalo man snorted as if asking for more. His breath smelled like rising dough. He raised his eyes to look at her. She ran her hands up and down the horns, slowly. She gripped them and polished their tips with her thumbs. She looked back to his eyes. They were a dense, muddy brown. Deep inside each eye Thelma saw a black, four-pointed star. She stared into the brown depths. The buffalo man ran his tongue up his right nostril and licked it out. He ran the tongue into the left nostril and

cleaned it out. Saliva oozed from the sides of his mouth and hung dreamily along his teeth. Drops of it spangled the short hairs around his lips. Thelma released the horns, ran her right hand over the hairy lump between his horns, petted the bulging skull between the eyes, felt the sandpaper flesh of his brown, flat nose. Then she stepped back and sneered, "Oh, that's awful. Feels like one of those tacky spades. Let's get out of here and find some nice smart bar." Folsom closed the brown bag and said, "Miss T., I'm with you. It's me and you against the world." They walked away and the next woman grabbed the horns. As Thelma and Folsom left, she took a handkerchief from her purse and wiped her hands. She put it back into her purse. Inside her yellow Thunderbird, she touched her shivering thighs on the insides. She put her right hand into her crotch to stop the itching.

### III.

The next morning, Thelma woke with a hangover and a pain in her right shoulder. She thought it a cramp until the hangover went away and the pain remained. That night she drank again until she was puking drunk. The next morning the pain was worse than the hangover. She vomited on the floor and on her rugs. Her husband cleaned it up. She took aspirin. She drank three cans of Budweiser. Within a week, she acknowledged the small lump under her right shoulder blade. When she went to see a doctor, he told her that she had a lump under her right shoulder blade and that that's what was causing her pain. He gave her some painkillers and told her to call him again if the pain didn't go away. It

didn't. She called. He examined her and told her that a lot of women were developing those lumps. The pain got worse each day. The lump got larger. Her doctor refused surgery because surgery to remove the lumps had already caused the deaths of ten women. She became anemic. Blood transfusions followed. She got paler and paler. The lump grew until it was a foot long, six inches wide and six inches high. It protruded from her shoulder down, a mound of raw skin on the right side of her back.

Thelma became unconscious and was taken to Good Samaritan Hospital nine months after the Carthage Fair. In the post-mortem, it was discovered that the lump was filled with velvet curtains of blood-soaked skin, long shanks of bloody black hair around the skin and thirty-two teeth, also bloody, in a circle. The black hair and skin ran down from the circle of the teeth. Each tooth, long and canine, sank deep into the chest, sank through the muscles, through the ribs and lungs, sank into the large veins that run into the heart. Blood had flowed out of the punctures and soaked into the hump until it was saturated.

Before leaving his office to wait for his next case, Jack Macies filed a report in which he stated, under oath, that Thelma Graybone deceased due to internal hemorrhage from unknown causes. Then he washed his hands. He put on his jacket. He cleaned his glasses. He smiled a little to himself. He told his secretary that the corpse was just like those other ones that had been coming in for the last few days. Sally stretched. She leaned back in her chair and remarked that she'd gotten another complaint from the Winchester Funeral Home. "They're all complaining. They can't get the bodies embalmed right. Worse, they can't lay

the bodies out flat because of the humps, and the families are having a hissy because the dearly beloved look so silly lying on their sides in all that satin." Jack giggled and said that the nitty-gritty was their problem and not his or hers.

As Jack headed for the door, Sally asked him where he was going. "Oh," he said, "I guess I'll trot on over to the old watering hole. My car is sick so I'll be gone longer than usual. I'm going to get a couple of shots in the tum-tum and then have some din-din, a bleeding steak and maybe a touch of asparagus. A few smart scotchies afterwards for the bod. If Annie Oakley calls, tell that ding-a-ling that I have her pink orchid for tonight's bash and not to worry about my roommate. She's in Chicago for her own hanky-panky. Miss Annie's not too swift sometimes. Oh, and if more of those tacky stiff's come in, get me on the horn. I'll be over at the Busy Beet, running my mouth with Buffalo Bill."



## Trivia

I was sixteen years old before I discovered what a wonderful thing a dictionary is. I was told that if I didn't know a word I should look it up in a dictionary and increase my vocabulary. A dictionary was just a utilitarian book used to check pronunciations, spellings or meanings of words. Until one day when I had nothing to read, I picked up an old Webster's Dictionary and just started reading it. I discovered that you could go out and look for words. You could expand your vocabulary not by waiting passively for a word to occur and then looking it up but by finding it in that magical list of words that you would never see unless you discovered it yourself. Reading a dictionary became for me a kind of adventure; it became a book of poetry, especially when I considered the etymologies. Open one up at random and see a series of words; resumption, resumptive, resupinate, resupine, resurface, resurgam, resurge, resurgent, resurrect, resurrection, resurrectionist, resurvey, resuscitate, resuscitator, Reszke, ret, retable. You read something like that and you can see why I became and remain a reader of dictionaries and reference books. My friend and neighbor Wayne C. Derrida laughs at me for doing it. Go ahead, laugh.

Yesterday I was reading in The Random House Dictionary of the English Language and came upon the word "trivial." It was not a new word to me, but the

etymology was. Like most words that I know, I use it and don't realize what the word contains. The specific usage of a word doesn't include an awareness of its etymology, its history, its ramifications, its magical implications. If you don't believe me, look up the word "ramify." Look up "cynical." See what a word has that you've never realized before. "Trivial" means a place where three roads come together. Hence a public place, a place of gossip. The "Trivium" was "the lower division of the seven liberal arts, comprising grammar, rhetoric and logic." The three roads that come together where memory becomes articulate, where memory becomes story, where memory becomes memorable.

Today is December 31, 1995. The Germans call the day "Silvester." Look it up. Tomorrow is the month of Janus, the "ancient Roman god of doorways, of beginnings and of the rising and setting of the sun, usually represented as having one head with two bearded faces back to back, looking in opposite directions." Hence our month of January. Hence our word "janitor." A janitor is a keeper of a door, a person who monitors our coming and going, a person who separates past and present just as the rising and the setting of the sun separate our lives into discrete moments. Our janitor looks backwards and forwards. Our janitor looks in and out. He opens and closes. He stands at crossings, where three roads meet, where we cross over crossroads. Our janitor is like a material, immanent Hermes who guides us between the living world and the world of the dead. He is a god of memory. Through memory he leads us between the world of the dead and the world of the living.

It's that passing back and forth that makes a story. It's that intercourse between the worlds of the material and the spiritual, the worlds of the dead and the living, that makes our stories. Fiction is our homage to those other worlds. Our janitor is like, as I read just yesterday in Madison Smartt Bell's *All Souls' Rising*, "Legba: vodoun god of crossroads and of change, vaguely analogous to Hermes of the Greek pantheon. Because Legba controls the crossroads between the material and spiritual worlds, he must be invoked at the beginning of all ceremonies." I don't know about Legba. I don't know about Janus. I do remember a crossroads. I don't know if Legba or Janus was there. Had I known, perhaps certain events would have been different. What happened where four roads came together was not trivial.

When I was twelve years old in 1942 I lived on a farm owned and operated by my brother-in-law Benjamin Paul Kitzler. The farm was five miles west of Newton, on a dirt road and a mile from the nearest neighbor. Ben married my only sister Agatha Theresa Seiltanzer in 1941 and they had just begun the second year of their married life on that dirt farm that would run them into the ground by the time they were forty-four years old. They asked me to come out and stay with them because they were, I think, lonely. This was just after they had their only child La Donna Magdalene, who was born mentally retarded although they didn't realize that until she was two years old. Eventually they put her into the Kansas State Home for the Mentally Retarded in Zimmerdale and then into Wheatfield Acres and left her there to die, which she did at the age of forty-two in 1984. That was after I had become a university professor and

could pay for her keep and her funeral because by then Ben had sold the farm and Ben had become the town drunk and Agatha was dead since 1976, having died of what William Weary called “coronation trombone.”

When I came to live with Ben and Agatha in 1942, it was already a time of falling down, of living with few amenities, of crop failures and debt. The barn, the chickenhouse, the granary, the pigbarn and the house were all falling apart. The fences needed mending. The windmill didn't work properly. There was always a water shortage. Weeds grew while the wheat and corn collapsed in drought, disease or insects. The income from cream and egg sales barely paid for groceries. There was a little cream-colored Motorola radio that picked up one station. The newspaper they subscribed to was used mainly to swat flies. No books. The outhouse was built by the WPA in the 1930's. The memories are all of decay, emptiness and defeat. And all of that was before Ben became the town drunk in Newton and before the slobbering daughter La Donna was put away and before Agatha Theresa's cancer. Now at the age of sixty-five, I cross over from the present into those past memories only after some Budweiser and some reading of the Bible.

Now, here in Cincinnati in my dirty one-room apartment on Riddle Road, I summon up Janus and Legba as I begin to remember being twelve years old and walking out to escape from the oppression. Two beers and Psalm 23 and I can handle it. I started by walking a mile west. The road in front of the house ran east and west and I went west first. At that time I didn't know the difference between east and west. I'm not talking about east and west as directions. I mean I didn't know what they mean. The road ran

downhill from the driveway. It crossed Middle Emma Creek, the creek that ran through Ben's pasture, the creek by whose side I would later bury La Donna's and Agatha's ashes and where I would make a burial place for me and Ben. The bridge was very low and barely cleared the usually dry bed beneath it. Uphill again and past sagging fences and withering hedges. After one half mile, the road passed an abandoned farm where, I was told by Ben, the farmer had hanged himself in his barn when his wife died from tuberculosis. All that remained was the two-story house with no doors or windows and the barn with its open doors and glassless windows. I went into the barn. It smelled of old hay and rotten wood. A barn owl stood in the rafters. I turned back. I didn't know why, except that it wasn't what I wanted to see and remember.

It was different to walk east. At that time I didn't know the magic of things eastern. My sense of it must have begun then. Because when I went east I walked two miles and came to a crossroads and the tiny house of Jacob "Jake" Bundelhode. The road to the crossroads was lined with tall hedge. It was the hedge that was planted in the Dust Bowl years to keep the soil from blowing away. It was the kind of hedge called "Osage Orange" and produced a green, sticky, softball-sized fruit called hedge balls or hedge apples. By 1942 the hedges were so tall that walking along a road was like walking through a tree-lined ditch. Those hedges provided cover for multitudes of birds and animals. The hedges also grew right up to the corners where roads intersected and made the corners very dangerous. The hedges prevented you from seeing anyone

coming from your right or left sides. It was at those country crossroads that people often were killed.

I remember now that it was a spring day when I set out to the east to walk the two miles. It must have been spring because I remember seeing a pair of Baltimore orioles weaving their string nest. And it must have been a Sunday or else I would have been working in the fields with Ben trying to save that shriveling farm. I know I set out from the farm after telling Agatha that I would be back by supper. She said, as she slapped at flies with the folded newspaper, "Peter, watch out for the crossroads." She called me "Peter." It was Ben who always called me "Skyblue." Before setting out, I washed my face, combed my hair, cleaned my glasses, tied my boots and put an apple in my pocket. Leaving the farmyard was a relief. Stepping out onto the road was to make myself another person.

Jake Bundelhode's house was just two rooms. There was a front door, one front window, a chimney and a small front porch. You could see through the window that the house was filled with books. The house was set on the southwest corner of the crossroads and faced the northeast. You approached it through a cut in the hedge that was about ten feet wide. Jake could sit on his front porch and see all that went on at the corner. When I walked through the opening in the hedgerow, Jake was sitting on his little front porch, reading a book. When he saw me he put down his book and said, "Skyblue, come on up here and sit a while. I haven't had any company for a long time." I took one of his old chairs and sat next to him.

I figured that Jake was at least eighty years old. That was in 1942 so he must have been born around 1862. He was small and withered. His hair was grayish white. He always needed a shave. His skin was red. His nose was pointed. His eyes were brown and topped by long white eyelashes. His ears stuck straight out from his head. He always wore a denim shirt and bib overalls. I had never seen him in any other clothes. Ben told me that Jake had lived at that corner for as long as anyone could remember. No one knew how he made his living. Jake sat silently. I waited for something.

When I asked Jake why he continued to live at that corner with no one around, he said that he was living there because he was the last resident and his house was the last house of the town called "New Canaan." He said the town was founded in 1880 by a group of ten farmers and their families. They laid out the town where the north-south road and the east-west road crossed. By 1898, he said, when he came here at the age of thirty-six, there were twenty-four houses in the town and a population of 211. There was a grocery store, a blacksmith shop, a church, a school. I asked where they all were now and he said that they had all been destroyed by fire or by tornados. All that remained, he said, was his house and the cemetery that was behind the hedge opposite his house. I said I had never seen any tombstones there, and he said that they had all been taken away to be crushed for stone for a highway.

Maybe it's the great length of time since I sat there and talked to Jake Bundelhode. That's now some fifty-three years ago and 800 miles away. But I remember him touching me. He stroked my hair, patted the back of my

head, held my hand as he talked about New Canaan. I didn't mine at the time because Jake told me about Oedipus, how he, completely unknown to himself, killed his father where three roads came together, how he met the Sphinx at a crossroads and answered the riddle that saved Thebes and then went on to marry his own mother, again completely not knowing what he was doing. Jake said that was the earliest story he knew about crossroads. He told me that when Jesus arose from the dead, he waited for his disciples at a crossroads on the road to Emmaus. He said the emperor Constantine was standing at a crossroads when he saw the cross in the sky and became a Christian. He said that at the center of ancient Rome there was a crossroads and all distances in the empire were measured from that point. He said that Dante entered the Inferno after he met Virgil at a crossroads. He said that Charlemagne became Holy Roman Emperor when he crossed the crossroads in Aix-la-Chapelle. He said that George Washington became Father of Our Country when he crossed the crossroads just outside Valley Forge and that General Lee surrendered to General Grant where the Appomattox Courthouse stood at a crossroads.

Jake told me that accidents happen at crossroads, that coincidences happen at crossroads, that fairs are held at crossroads, that cities are built at crossroads, that battles are fought at crossroads, that gods are worshiped at crossroads. The Roman goddess Diana, he said, had the cult title of "Trivia" because she, like Hecate, was worshiped at crossroads. He said that in that way crossroads were like rivers and what happened where rivers ran together. Roads, he said, are like dry rivers across the Kansas plains. New



Canaan, he said, was founded here because of the crossroads. His wife, he said, was killed in front of his house as she walked to the well located in the middle of the crossroads and a white cross twelve feet high was erected at the center of the crossroads to get God to look out for them all and they all expected a railroad to cross over the crossroads and make them all memorable.

He stayed, he said, because the empty roads and the empty fields by his house were still peopled by those who had lived in New Canaan. He said he could still see his son Adalbert Bundelhode riding his gray pony across the street to Bertram St. John's Grocery Store. He could still hear his son singing as he walked to the one-room school on the east-west road just past The First Missionary Baptist Church of the Linen Clothes and the Wrapped Napkin. He could still hear the organ playing in the church on Sunday his favorite hymn "Lest my Footfalls Sink Below." He said he could still hear the blacksmith Jorgan Bellislaw clanging his hammers against his anvil. He said he could still see and hear the children on their way to Bethesda District Grade School, hear them singing, "When the sun arises, gladly so we face the day." Reader, pick up your dictionary and look up "Bethesda." Find out why the school was named as it was.

I remember now. It was a Sunday, April 5, 1942. I remember that because Bundelhode told me a story that I remember almost verbatim. Check the meaning of "verbatim." Here's his story:

"It was Sunday morning, April 5, 1925. I was sitting on the front steps of this house, waiting for my son Adalbert, his wife Mestwina and their new son Pontius to

come out so that we could head over for the services at The First Church of the Linen Clothes and the Wrapped Napkin. I was sixty-three years old and a proud grandfather. I could hear the organ from the church playing 'When the sun arises, God's bright face begins the day.' The sun was shining and it was a glorious day. The Dust Bowl hadn't started yet and the hedges weren't here yet so I could look to the east and see a long way out across that flat prairie. I did and I saw a wagon coming. It was pulled by a team of roan and white horses. Small horses but clearly draught animals. The wagon had a white canvas cover supported by high mental hoops. There were designs, letters, images, painted on the side of the canvas. A man and a woman sat on the seat on the front of the wagon, just behind the horses.

"The wagon entered New Canaan and stopped by the well where the roads came together. I walked out to the wagon to see what was going on. All the people on the way to church gathered around. The man and woman both got down from their seat on the wagon. The man was wearing a turban made of gold cloth. He was dressed in a long dark blue robe that was covered with gold five-pointed stars. His high black boots were covered with dust. Baggy black trousers were tucked into the tops of the boots. He had long black, greasy hair. His eyes were very dark, his black eyebrows thick and shaggy, his long black beard hung down to the middle of his chest. It was his nose that everyone looked at. It was huge and hooked. When he opened his mouth to smile, we could see that his teeth were bright gold.

“The woman was just as strange to us. Her long, brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She had blue eyes, white teeth and a mole on her upper left lip. Long, wiry hairs grew out of it. Her nose was pointed and her chin was almost unnoticeable. It was her ears that everyone looked at. They were large and stood straight out from her head. She was wearing a long yellow robe covered with orange rising suns. She wore some shoes that had wooden soles. The brown leather on the shoes was covered with red crescent moons.

“Our neighbor, Felix Hauenstein, went up to the man and woman, shook their hands and said, ‘Welcome to New Canaan. My name is Felix Hauenstein and these are the citizens of our town.’ The man said, ‘I’m Ben Temalion Kitzler and this is my wife Bethulah. Our son Benjamin Paul is asleep in the wagon. I’m sometimes called “Ben the Circle-Drawer” because I earn my living by what I can do inside a circle. My wife and I are Essenes and we raise people from the dead. Can we camp anywhere near here?’ Felix Hauenstein directed them to an empty field that the citizens of New Canaan were going to make into a public park and Kitzler and his wife drove over there, put out their horses to graze, carried water from the public well and set up their tent. I saw the five year old kid get out of the wagon and wander around beside the wagon whose white canvas was covered with shooting stars, black crescent moons, black birds with long necks and long legs, dogs with pointed ears, pointed noses and long, thin legs. All the dogs were lying down next to sphinxes and obelisks. Over the designs on each side was a sign in large black letters that said, ‘Temalion and Bathulah, Thaumaturges.’

Skyblue, you'll have to look up that word when you get back home. I'm not sure what it means myself.

"That afternoon the citizens of New Canaan gathered around the wagon. I stayed on the road and watched. Felix Hauenstein and a man named Abraham Koch were talking to the Circle-Drawer and his wife. Their son Benjamin stood just behind them. Kitzler and his wife crawled into the wagon and came out with boxes and rods. They were wearing the robes that they arrived in. There was discussion, some money was handed to Ben Temalion and then the whole group began to move out towards the road and me. They followed the road to the cemetery. I followed them. The New Canaanites were laughing as they followed Ben Temalion into the cemetery and surrounded a fresh grave. It was the grave of Elijah Onias, who had just been buried on Friday. I heard Ben Temalion Kitzler say to Hauenstein and Koch, 'Three days is the limit. Rigor mortis is too far advanced. Corruption is not deniable forever.'

"Ben Temalion Kitzler began his ceremony by drawing a circle in the dirt. He stopped inside it and said, 'I will never leave this circle until Elijah Onias arises from his grave.' He then laid nine rods along the edge of the grave. The rods, about three feet long, all pointed towards the grave. His wife knelt at the foot of the grave and sifted dirt through her hands. Ben's gold turban and the gold stars on his robe glittered in the sun as he began chanting through his sparkling gold teeth. It was a language none of us understood. Later folks said it was Gypsy, or Chinese, or Mongolian. Whatever it was, the sky began to darken. Heavy clouds covered the sun. The wind began to blow out of the east and dust swirled. The people covered their faces

and faced away from the wind and the swirling dust and the grave. There came on them load cracking and pounding like rocks rolling across planks. They bent towards the west and cried out in distress. Darkness covered the earth. The disturbance went on for about an hour. When the wind stopped and the sky cleared, the people turned and looked eastward again. The citizens of New Canaan wiped the dust from their eyes. They blinked in the returning light. They gathered around Ben Temalion Kitzler. They started to laugh. Then they noticed that all the dirt was gone from the grave and was scattered all about. They saw that the cross that had been on the head of the grave was lying some thirty feet away under an oak tree. They looked into the grave and saw that the casket was open and there was no body in it. Ben Temalion Kitzler still stood in his circle. His wife Bethulah still knelt at the foot of the grave, sifting dust through her hands. Then they looked westward towards the road where I stood and they saw Elijah Onias walking out of the cemetery.

“I watched the risen corpse approach. His three-piece black suit was covered with bits of dirt. His bare feet scuffed in the dust. His eyes were completely white. His gray beard was uncombed and hanging back over his left shoulder. He raised his left hand to signal me to get out of his way. I did. His left hand looked like spider webs spread over twigs. He walked past me and as he did he said, ‘Jacob, tell those folks to get me something to eat and drink. Tell them not to probate my will. Tomorrow I’m leaving for Emmaus.’ He walked towards the well at the crossroads. The crowd followed. I went back to my house

to look up 'Emmaus' to make sure it was where I thought it was.

"The next day, Monday, in the afternoon, I walked over to the covered wagon and met the five year old son Benjamin. He was a happy kid and very bright. He told me some kids' jokes. He asked me a riddle; 'He who makes it doesn't use it. He who buys it doesn't want it. He who uses it doesn't know it. What is it?' I never did figure out the answer. He told me that he had heard his parents the night before saying that they were going to buy a farm and settle down. When I asked why they had decided to quit wandering and why they had decided to give up raising the dead, the young Ben said that Sunday was the first time they'd ever succeeded.

"One week later Ben Temalion Kitzler and Bethulah bought and moved onto a farm two and one half miles west of New Canaan. They took the decorated canvas off their wagon. They hitched the roan horses to a plow. They bought two cows and some chickens. And they farmed themselves into the dirt. They raised their son to be a farmer and when young Ben turned fifteen they bought him his farm where he lived with your sister Agatha Theresa. Three years ago Bethula died of tuberculosis. Ben Temalion Kitzler hanged himself in his barn. The son Ben got married to your sister Agatha and brought you out here to New Canaan."

It was getting late so I told Jacob Bundelhode that I had to get back to the farm. I said that Ben would probably be drunk by the time I got back and I would have to do the milking myself. Jacob laughed quietly and said, "Tell Ben that today I remembered his parents." I went out to the

crossroads and looked around. There was nothing there. I looked back and Jacob was not on his porch. I started to walk the two miles back to Ben's farm. I walked west back to the callous dust of that decay. As I walked it came to me that if Ben wasn't drunk when I got back I would pour his whiskey for him. Then I would look up "thaumaturge" and "rigor mortis." When I was about a hundred yards from the intersection, I looked back and saw an automobile coming towards me from the east. It was moving fast and raising a plume of dust. When I looked south I could see, through a hole in the hedge, another plume of dust boiling up above the hedgerows from a car coming from the south. Both cars were traveling at a high rate of speed towards the crossroads at New Canaan.

When I walked into the house, Ben and Agatha were sitting at the kitchen table. Ben was staring at his palms. Agatha was trying to work the crossword puzzle in the Saturday paper. I could hear La Donna Magdalene choking and crying in her room. Ben said, "Skyblue, I'm not feeling well. Could you do the milking?" "Sure," I said. "I'll get right to it." Agatha stared out the dirty window and told me to hurry up and get back in for supper. She'd need me, she said, to help her look up the difficult words.

## The Entrepreneurs

It's amazing how easy it is to become a criminal. All it takes is a little greed and a lot of bad advice. Bailey and I got both. Bailey and I are identical twins. We have the same father and the same mother. Bailey is ten minutes older than me. That was fifty-five years ago in Cincinnati, Ohio. Our parents, Joe and Flo Margos, raised us Christian and taught us their family values. They were Republicans and made a living by selling contaminated fish to people they referred to as "coloreds." Bailey and I worked hard and decided to go into soup. We made the best soup possible. You've probably seen our picture on billboards. We're the two bald-headed gentlemen with the identical heads in a wreath of limp noodles. Light shines from Bailey's left eye and from my right eye. Underneath our double portrait we had our motto, "Sippin' Soup," and the name of our company, "Margos Super Soups." We don't look like crooks and we never intended to do any double-dealing.

It was all so easy that we should have known that it was going to fail. We went for the fast buck and we made it. Except that the patrons didn't take kindly to the fact that we slipped out the emergency exit just as the sun was beginning to rise. Now Bailey and I have all this money, some \$2,328,080,000, and we can't spend it. We can't pay the commission to our advisor. We can't even leave our



room in the Philadelphia Motel for fear that we'll be spotted and arrested. Our room is contaminated by pizza crusts and dirty bedding. We can't let the cleaning lady in because Bailey says he saw her in the white seats. We don't let the room service clerk in because we think he was a vendor at the stadium. It's as if a huge stone has been rolled against our door. We've been here a week and no longer speak in unison. Our cash has turned to ashes and our business to dust. We should have paid the fine and stuck with Super Soups.

What was so easy began in the Magus Bar and Garden. It's call "Magus" because it's owned by Mamie and Gus Plotsik. Bailey and I were regulars there and we went there one January night in 1995 because we were broke and wanted a drink. The bartender wouldn't run us a tab and we were going to leave when an elderly gentleman sitting at the front of the bar told us to sit down and he would buy both of us a bottle of beer. He was about six feet tall, gray hair, thin, hard-of-hearing and writing on three-by-five cards. He looked depressed like John on Patmos must have looked when he wrote *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*. He was drinking Budweiser and we said we'd have the same in order to get in the spirit. The bartender brought the beers and, unbeknownst to us, our new business began.

I introduced myself and my brother Bailey. I told him our last name was Margos and he said that we looked remarkably alike. "That's understandable," we said in unison, "because we're identical twins and we've been identical twins ever since we were born." I told him that Bailey and I had been in the soup business and our

company was called “Margos Super Soups,” and we did very well until our vichyssoise got something like salmonella or botulism in it and we were sued and we lost and we didn’t have a dime left and that we couldn’t pay our fines and that we lost our old business and that we were trying to find a new business and that we couldn’t get investors and that because we couldn’t get investors we couldn’t make a living and that we both really knew nothing about business except that we did know how to manipulate the books and where to find a lawyer when you get sued. He smiled and said, “Maybe I can help you.”

He introduced himself as Peter Seiltanzer. He said that most people called him “Skyblue” and that some added an epithet to that nickname. Because we often talk in unison, Bailey and I said, “What’s an epithet?” Seiltanzer went on to say that he had just been retired from the University of Cincinnati after thirty-two years of excellent service. He said that one day his dean called him in and said, “‘Pete, don’t you think it’s about time that you retire?’ I responded by saying that I had just turned sixty-five and that I still had many more years of valuable teaching years to offer the college. The dean said, ‘Skyblue, you got tenure by clerical error, so we’ll give you \$200,000 if you’ll just get the hell out. Now. I’ll hold the door open for you when you leave.’ I said, ‘I’m gone.’ And I left and the dean stood at the door and, smiling, handed me a check for \$200,000. Now I’m trying to spend some of that money before the IRS gets it all so have another beer.”

After an hour or so of drinking and listening to our complaints, Skyblue said that if we wanted to get back in business we should remember one word. Bailey and I said

in unison, "What's that word?" Skyblue smiled and said, "Religion." We said in unison, "Why religion?" Skyblue sipped his beer and said, "Religion is the oldest and easiest of all scams ever run on a populace. Remember that moths and rust and salmonella don't destroy religious belief. Nowadays people don't read the Bible. You could tell them that the recipe for vichyssoise is in *The Book of Malachi* and they'd believe you. You could tell them that the 'Sermon on the Mount' begins with 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America' and they'd believe you. You could tell them that the Disciples played baseball in the Garden of Gethsemane while waiting for Christ to be hauled away to be crucified and they'd believe you. In short, they're religious and dumb. If you tell them that they're not religious, they'll roll a huge stone in front of your motel door so that you can't ever get out."

Bailey and I said in unison, "We understand what you're saying but how?" Skyblue sipped and said, "The year two thousand. Get a long-range plan. It's 1995. You got five years. It'll be easy pickings." "Why," we said in unison, "2000?" Skyblue set down his beer, looked at us with pity and said, "I guess you don't read the Bible just like the rest of the people here in Cincinnati. The year 2000 is, for Christ's sake, Armageddon time. The end of the world. It's all there in *The Good Book*. Prophets and prophecies will come crying out of every religious wilderness. The churches might even get a few converts. The priests might even get married. Abortion may become legal again. The nuns might give birth. The Roman Catholic Church might allow divorced people to marry. The Protestants might accept transubstantiation and the

Pope. They might even agree that St. Peter was the first Pope. They both might decide that military force is not Christian. They might even force the president to cut the military budget. Poor people might be pitied and helped. The homeless might find refuge and the sick might get their doctor bills cancelled. The Citizens for Community Values might read *Playboy*. The Republicans might unionize. One thing's for sure; everyone will be cashing in on the Last Days. You might as well get your cut." Before leaving that night, we hired Seiltanzer to be our advisor, we told him Bailey and I would incorporate, and we promised him a complete proposal within two days. We promised him ten percent of the gate receipts.

Bailey and I incorporated as quickly as possible as "Barney and Bailey Margos, Inc." Then we got our proposal together. It was simple. As Skyblue suggested, the first thing we needed was a stadium that seated 144,000 people and was built at city and state expense. We had almost no trouble getting our stadium approved because just as we made our pitch for a stadium the governor of the state was raising money to build new stadiums for professional baseball and professional football teams. The pressure was on the City Council and the state governor to build those stadiums in order to keep the professional teams in Ohio. We got the private phone number of the State Treasurer from a local state representative. We called the Treasurer and said that we'd build the stadium in Kentucky if Ohio didn't come up with the money. We also told him that come Easter Sunday, 2000 A.D., the stadium had better be ready, at least for 144,000 fans. We told him that they'd better keep professional religion in Ohio or they'd regret it

when Armageddon flashed up with the rising sun and that there was no use for a giant screen for instance replays. We said, "You got three and one half years so that we have at least 1260 days for promotion." We got the money the next day and a message from the mayor of Cincinnati thanking us for our civic resourcefulness.

The architect we hired was a native Cincinnati, a man of no taste and less skill. He, Rodney Joist, was recommended by Skyblue because he had been kicked out of the College of Design, Art and Architecture at the University of Cincinnati for squirting Coca-Cola on the design models of the students. He lived in the same building with Skyblue on Riddle Road and was unemployed. Skyblue gave him the specs and he went to work. The stadium was to be a shallow parabola, facing and open to the east on the right bank of the Ohio River. It had to seat 144,000 fans. It had to have twelve gates for the customers to enter. The seats were to be tiered, with an open view for each seat, and were to be arranged in the colors blue, white and red, the red being the highest seats. In the front row there was to be a large box area with twelve large, comfortable chairs. This was to be the gold section and there was to be an emergency exit immediately behind the seats. The plans were completed in three days and construction began.

Bailey and I next, according to Skyblue's instructions, had to set the date. He told us how to do this. He told us, first, there is the common idea of a Millennium. That's given. Nothing happened after the first Millennium of the Christian era, but that's neither here nor there. It made no difference. Since then lots of dates have been set for the

Second Coming. None was ever correct. But he had, he said, the correct calculation. The secret, he said, was gematria. "Gematria?" we asked in unison. "That's right," he said. "It's all numbers and it's all right there in the Bible."

His calculations went something like this. You begin with the Trinity, that is, three. There are four Gospels. Four plus three equals seven. Seven is the number of Revelation. Then, four times three is twelve, the number of Disciples and the number of months in the year. Four then means that it will all happen in April, the fourth month of the year. The number for April is fifty-six. The number for Revelation is 121. The number for Matthew is ninety, the number for Mark is forty-three, the number for Luke is forty-nine and the number for John is forty-seven. Add those together and you get 229. Add 229 and 121 and you get 350. There are twenty-two chapters and 403 verses in Revelation. Then he started adding things, subtracting, multiplying and dividing and Bailey and I didn't understand anymore what he was talking about. Finally, he stopped and asked, "Are you following all this?" We said, in unison, "No." He said, "Never mind. It comes out to be Easter Sunday, April 23, 2000 A.D. And that's exactly how it's supposed to come out." We agreed that that was the right date.

With the date set, we went back to business, something which Bailey and I understand. When we discussed a marketing plan with Peter he said, "That's the easiest part of all. To make a marketing plan succeed you need to have a large number of people in a specific area. These people have to have a maximum gullibility. That you have here in Cincinnati. To succeed you have to have

stodgy, complacent, self-satisfied, ignorant people by the thousands and you can't fail. That you have here in Cincinnati. To succeed in your marketing plan you have to have droves of smug people who are humorless. That you have here in Cincinnati. You won't even need billboards. Finally, you need a catchy slogan, something to put on t-shirts and mugs and pennants. You need something clever like the Bengals got when they came up with 'Who dey, who dey.' You need something clever like the Cincinnati Reds came up with when they created 'the Big Red Machine.'" After talking with Skyblue, Bailey and I came up with "The Last Bash." Skyblue said it was all right; it would fit nicely on a mug.

With our marketing plan in place and in operation, with our date firm, with our stadium under construction, Skyblue suggested that we give serious consideration to a name for the facility. Bailey and I hadn't even begun to think about a name. We assumed it would be called "Sunrise Stadium" or "Ohio River Stadium" or "Memorial Stadium." When he heard "Memorial Stadium," Seiltanzer was furious. "Memorialize what?" he said. "There's nothing in this world worth memorializing. What is it a memorial to? It'll only be used once and then no one will remember anything. It will all be over. There will be no before and after. You need an intriguing name, something catchy, something up-front. I suggest you call it 'The St. Tib's Municipal Stadium.'" Bailey and I said in unison, "Who is St. Tib?" "Ah," he said, "that's the beauty of the name. No one knows who St. Tib is. Get it? The name will be like the event itself. No one knows what the name of the place means. No one knows what will happen there.

Surround the place with religious mystery and build your house of money on gullibility. You can't lose." The marquee went up. The road signs all pointed the way to St. Tib's Municipal Stadium.

Then there was the program itself. Bailey and I tried desperately to think what you can do to entertain 144,000 gullible, humorless Cincinnatians until the sun rises. We figured to have everyone seated by 1:00 A.M. on April 23, 2000 A.D. That leaves about five hours of entertaining. "Impossible," we said in unison. "Let's get Skyblue on this." He came and said, "You need a master of ceremonies, of course. He should be from the Tribe of Dan." "Why from the Tribe of Dan?" we asked in unison. "Never mind," he said. "Just call the master of ceremonies 'Dan.' No one will get the joke anyway. We could call him 'Naphtali,' but no one would get that joke either." "But what will he do for five hours?" we asked in unison. "Let him tell Christian jokes with punch lines like 'Thank God it's Friday' and 'I can see your house from here' and 'They fall through the holes in his hands.' There are a million of them. He'll have no trouble taking up at least a couple of hours."

Skyblue then got hot on the program idea. He suggested an orchestra: harpers, pipers and trumpeters. He suggested a sing-along. Songs like "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland," "Ach, Du Lieber Augustin," "I'll Fly Away," "Deep River," "Will the Circle be Unbroken," "Shall We Gather at the River," "Nearer My God to Thee," "When the Saints Go Marching In," "Twelve Gates to the City" and "Auld Lang Syne." Maybe some cheers with twelve young girl cheerleaders dressed in purple and waving white, black,



red and pale pompoms. Call them “the Armageddolls” and have them lead the crowd in “Sis, boon bah/ Rah, rah, rah/ We’re going to heaven/ Hah, hah hah.” And vendors selling Rolling Stones albums, do it yourself suicide kits, recipes for ambrosia salad, dramamine pills, fire extinguishers, frequent-flyer passes, 3-D Cinegoggles to see through the fire, gift certificates to the Celestial Restaurant. Bailey and I agreed that we’d had enough of Skyblue’s planning. It was becoming like a contamination of our new business. We guaranteed him his ten percent and told him, in unison, to leave.

We went ahead without him and, finally, after five years of planning and advertising and five years of building St. Tib’s Municipal Stadium all was ready for April 23. There were 144,000 seats. Each row had fifty score seats. One hundred and forty-four rows ascended the parabola. Each seat was one cubit in width and built like a tiny throne. The back and arm rests of each throne were detachable so that they could be removed for the upward flow. Each seat had a cushion with springs so that the cushion would give added lift in the initial moments of ascension.

The tickets went on sale at matins on April 22. Skyblue had advised us not to give free tickets to the unemployed and the homeless, even though the unemployment rate was pushing ninety percent and the hundred new Ohio prisons were filled to overflowing. “Cash only,” he said. The lowest ten rows were the white seats @\$8,000 each. The next forty-four rows were the blue seats @\$12,000 each. The top ninety rows were the red seats @\$20,000 each. There was some complaint that the

red seats cost the most, but we told them, as Skyblue advised, that the red seats were closer to heaven. Therefore the occupants of the red seats would waste less time in their ascension. Each ticket included a pair of 3-D Cinegoggles. The twelve gold seats were reserved for me, Bailey, Skyblue, the governor, the State Treasurer, the mayor of Cincinnati, the two local members of the state legislature, the President of the University of Cincinnati, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Cincinnati, the two state senators and the coach of the Kentucky Bengals. All the tickets were sold by 3:00 P.M.

That night, before departing for St. Tib's, as we'd come to fondly call the place, Bailey and I counted up our money. A total of \$2,238,080,000. Our plan was a great success. Super Soups never did so well, vichyssoise or no vichyssoise. Our only disappointment was that Skyblue had rejected our invitation to the show. He suggested that we invite in his place the president of the Citizens for Community Values. Which we did and he accepted. Skyblue the Badass said that he wanted to be reading *The Book of Malachi* when the world came to an end, just in case there was a recipe there for vichyssoise.

Bailey and I arrived at St. Tib's at 11:30 P.M. on April 22. The crowd was already filing through the twelve gates into the stadium for the one and only performance of the greatest show on earth. Sales were brisk at the souvenir stands: unbreakable mugs, fire-proof t-shirts, pennants shaped like angels' wings, baseball caps with helicopter blades on top of them. The harpers were harping, the pipers were piping and the trumpeters were trumpeting. We took our seats at midnight. At 1:00 A.M. Dan came on and told

jokes, the Armageddolls pranced, the vendors moved through the stands, the audience loved the sing-along.

At 4:00 A.M. it all changed. The sellout crowd began to moan. Then they began to cry out in loud voices. Finally, at 5:00 A.M. they began to whimper and babble strange words. The lights were turned off on St. Tib's. Candles were lit in that great getting up morning. The darkness began to fade. The false dawn came on. The 144,000 put on their 3-D Cinegoggles. Bailey and I said in unison, "It's finished." We left our golden seats and slipped out the emergency exit under the stands. We took our money and headed for our hideout in the Philadelphia Motel. We didn't turn on the lights of our car until we were two miles away from St. Tib's. We turned our lights on just as the sun began to rise.

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