

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 1

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# TRINKETS

by RUSS BICKERSTAFF

I was trying to keep the trinkets quiet. I kept wanting to yell at them and ask them if they wanted to negotiate, but I felt crazy enough as it was. I looked up to address the woman across the table from me and took a deep breath. The shouting of the trinkets was something that was very, very difficult to channel out under normal circumstances. Doing so under the tremendous stress of the present moment was that much more difficult. She was about to ask me something when I finally cleared my throat to speak. It silenced her long enough for me to find some words to speak to her.

“I need them to help me out,” I said, “but in order for them to help me, I have to help them first.” There was silence as my words drifted in her general direction. She seemed to be reluctantly considering them the way anyone would be moved to consider something that wasn’t terribly intelligible. I felt the need to explain what I had just said, but I figured the most polite thing to do under the circumstances was let her decide how it was that she wanted me to explain what I had just said.

“What,” she asked carefully considering her words, “do you mean?” Ah. Well. This question didn’t really give me any idea what she needed to know, but I knew that it was my move, so I had to say something. I knew that I had to decide how I was going to try to sell these things from the ground up,

which I suspected may have been why it had been so difficult to sell them for the many years that led into that meeting. There was always the need to explain why it was I was selling them and that was always something that I had such tremendous difficulty with.

“I mean that they want me to sell them,” I said. “And I want to sell them because if I don’t they won’t help me.” It was a pretty straightforward way to answer her question without getting too far into things that were going to make me seem crazy. I tried to be as nice about not really answering her question as possible. I even attempted to manage a sheepish, little smile as I softly spoke the words which actually mean so little to her question. I so wanted to be helpful to her, but I wanted to sell the trinkets even more.

“Okay,” she said without breaking eye contact or batting an eye. “What are the trinkets going to help you with if you sell them to me?” Again, it was a straightforward question that required a straightforward answer that I was in no position to be able to answer in a straightforward manner. I considered the best way to answer this without having her throw me out of her shop and onto the ritzy, designer sidewalk of the high-end shopping district in which her expensive, little artisanal boutique lounged.

“The trinkets are going to help me with a very debilitating issue which is far too

tedious to get into detail at this time,” I said carefully. I was, after all, bound to honesty by the trinkets. “Suffice it to say, it would not inconvenience the trinkets in any way for me to sell them to you. You would be doing no harm to any other person by purchasing them from me.” And again, what I was speaking was completely true. I was speaking it in a tone that implied no menace at all.

“I see,” she said inspecting the trinkets quite closely. They beamed with pride the way some trinkets do under the gaze of a seasoned salesperson like myself or the lady across the counter from me. “While your personal issues are of no concern to me, I can understand needing to unload a parcel of goods in a hurry. The workmanship and detailing on these... things is substantial. I assure you I would have no trouble finding homes for these things. I would, however, ask a bit more about their concern in the transaction.”

“Ah,” I said perking up a bit. Usually this was where things were in a much worse situation. Usually this was where I would be cast out. “As I say, they have a will of their own and they wish me to sell them. They are very eager to be sold.” All of which was completely true.

“But when you say they have a will,” she said cautiously, “I mean...do you really

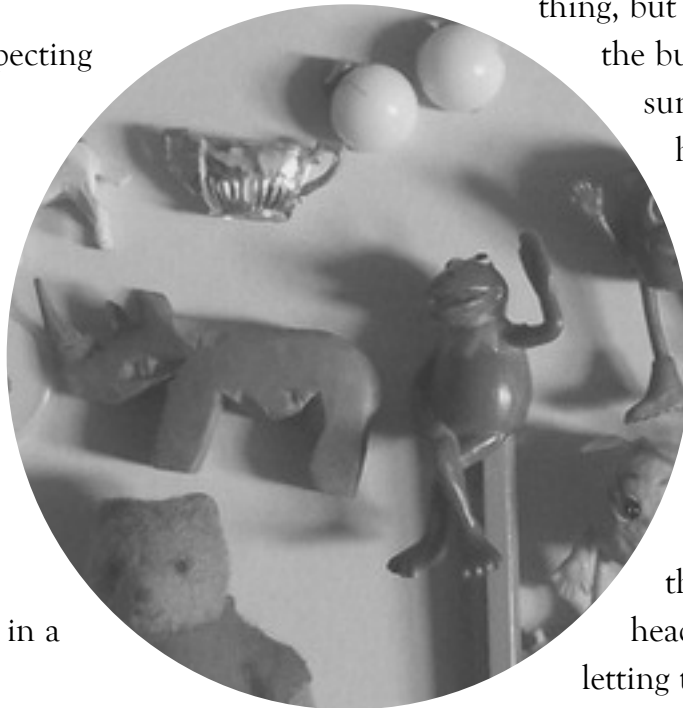
feel that they’re...sentient?”

“Well, what’s sentience, really? I may perhaps be personifying them in some way in order to advance my own personal interests as a dealer in fine things, but I assure you that you need not worry for my sake.” It was a simple matter of distraction. Always bring the conversation back around to me.

There was a concern about the whole thing, but she turned out to be the buyer. I took a meager sum for the trinkets. I

had no doubt in my mind that she would be able to get rid of the items in question. The items were very persistent. Once sold, they were quite persistent in crawling their way into the heads of their owners and letting them know that it was

very important that they get sold again. They were addicted to selling themselves. They existed only to be sold. It had grown to become a problem for me...a problem that would only be able to be solved by my selling them. The other problem was, of course, the honesty they instilled in the owner. No one who owned those things was ever allowed to lie. They were quite insistent upon that much. It was the most difficult thing to manage about the whole deal, I mean really: how does any dealer of *anything* become successful if one must be truly, brutally honest about everything? ❖



# THE SUNSET MAN

by TREVOR BOELTER

In Los Angeles, watching the setting sun is an activity all in itself. I blame the pollution – that although the smog is better than it was in the 80's and 90's – the congested LA air provides some of the most stellar sky gazing anyone could ask for in the western hemisphere.

In my neighborhood – it is no exception. We're luckier than most – because we have views that are unimpeded by the plethora of apartment buildings, that are torn down and resurrected for the continuing stream of dreamers to reside.

We have a view that most of the valley residents would kill for. You see, in our neighborhood, we border an empty city block that is reserved solely for Disney Radio.

Imagine, in one of the most populated cities in the world, an entire city block that is empty of homes, cars, skateboarding teenagers, Jewish families walking to temple, BBQ's, a kid practicing drums in their garage and any of the other multitude of activities that us Angelinos feel compelled to do before and after nightfall.

The empty expanse offers nothing but short brown grass and brambles, which is surrounded by a tall chain link fence topped with razor wire. The fence guards the three massive radio towers that sit in the middle of the reserve, standing as a marker for

incoming airplanes forever blinking red lights and a signal that propels 50,000 watts (times 3) throughout southern California.

It's not uncommon walk my dog on a hot summer night, and when passing certain spots of that empty city block, I will feel as if we walked into a freezer.

The temperature drops a significant number of degrees – and I know that if I were carrying a fluorescent light bulb – the energy emanating from each tower would power that fluorescence into a white phantom glow.

I don't like to linger along the fence – it feels unsafe – wondering what the wattage from each tower is doing to my bones, to my brain, to the cells that are living within an atoms reach.

The signs posted every hundred yards along the fence seem to parrot this:

NO TRESPASSING -  
UNSAFE CONDITIONS BEYOND  
THIS BORDER.

As I'm sure the towers are thoughtful enough to only push their radioactivity up to the border of the fence – as if it were courteous of the neighbors across the street.

Still when viewing the towers from further down the road, where my house sits on our quiet street – with their silent blinking

red lights, the towers are a lovely sight to behold.

The empty lot tells us that there could be hundreds, if not thousands of souls that could live in that square – and without them, we feel we have been granted that most rare gift lacking in LA – open space.

It was on those walks with my dog, a good thirty minutes before sunset, as the sun still hung high enough in the sky to sting my eyes that I first caught glimpse of the Sunset Man.

In the following year that I saw him – I never got his name – but kept calling him the Sunset Man to my wife, and any friends who were lucky enough to see him at his post.

Because if no one had seen him except for me – I’m sure I would believe I was going mad.

But now that he is gone – I wonder if my sanity is all that it’s cracked up to be?

And I think now – did he have the answers all along? Or was it that the answer he finally received was enough to make him disappear for good?

When I first saw the Sunset Man, my dog Deuce was still alive. I had two dogs; Fox and Deuce. Fox was a four-year-old American Eskimo who was obsessed with playing ball. Deuce, on the other hand, was a thirteen-year-old cocker/lab mix whose only yearning was to sleep.

They were the oddest pair – and though they hated each other when they were off-leash – they could at least find

peace when I walked them at the beginning of each evening.

During the summer – sunlight stays open till 8 – but after the Summer Solstice, the closing time grows earlier and earlier.

It was late in July of last year when I first saw him – his hands locked behind his back, head cocked high, as he stared – without sunglasses – at the sinking sun in sky.

The Sunset Man seemed to be relatively young – in his early twenties, with short hair and vanilla plain features. He wore shorts and a t-shirt, and although the shirt often changed, the shorts did not.

He didn’t look to be a member of the majority tribe that made up the community of my neighborhood – as we are “within shul” or a short walk to Temple – as the Jewish families in the area would be considered somewhere between Ortho and Ultra-dox.

The Sunset Man never wore a yarmulke, nor did he ever acknowledge the many families that walked past him, as they wore their Shabbat best – the men walking first with the women a few steps behind.

The Sunset Man acknowledged no one.

He just was – standing as still as the radio towers before him – as if those long steel cables that held each tower firmly to the ground were also holding him upright.

When I first walked past him, my dog Deuce sniffed his leg. I knew Deuce was getting older and feared that he might raise a leg on him, thinking the man wasn’t human, but as he stood so still, some new type of fire hydrant.

Pulling Deuce away, I said my first words to the Sunset Man: "Sorry."

But the Sunset Man took no notice. He never moved an inch.

I had a chance to look at him in that moment. His hazel eyes squinted, unblinking and open as he stared at the sun. The look on his face was serious determination with his jaw clenched, while the rest of him stood at a parade rest.

I didn't say anything further than 'sorry,' and walked the dogs down another street.

I thought nothing of it, really.

Everyone likes to watch the sunset – and though it seemed a little bit early to catch the show, who was I to consider anything out of the ordinary?

It wasn't until I kept seeing him, day after day, that I mentioned it to my wife.

"There's a guy always standing by the radio towers – he just stands there and stares at the sun."

"Every day?" She asked.

"As far as I can tell," I said. "Always around the same time, just before sunset..."

"Maybe he just likes to watch the sunset." She said.

"Without sunglasses?" I asked.

Being born with blue eyes – I can't be outside without sunglasses – my eyes burn even on days where it's cloudy.

"Huh," she said, obviously not that interested.

And truth being told – neither was I.

It wasn't until I spoke with the Sunset Man a year later that I started to second-

guess everything I thought about him.

That summer turned to fall, and moved quickly into winter – and still, whenever I walked the dogs, I would see the Sunset Man at the same place near the chain-link fence, watching with the sunset with those squinting, unblinking eyes.

It became a joke for us – after driving home from a day out with our one-year-old daughter my wife finally saw him.

"Oh my god, you weren't joking around."

"Nope."

"He does this every day?"

"As far as I know."

"That's so creepy!"

"What did I tell you?"

"Why do you think he does that?"

"Maybe he's some kind of reverse vampire."

The Sunset Man soon became part of repertoire of stories with friends and family who came to visit:

"Did you see him?"

"Who do you mean?" they would ask.

"The Sunset Man?"

"Hey, wait...we saw a guy standing near that big open lot..."

And we'd smile and nod, and say, "That's the one."

The stories we came up with about why he would stare at the sun each and every day varied:

He was trying to send messages to his home planet. He was really the first person powered by solar energy. He saw something terrible when he was a child and forever

tried to burn the image out of his mind...

It was fun for a time – but something in the pit of my stomach told me to lay off – that although the jokes were harmless – his pain, his torment, or whatever it was, could be in fact very real.

Eventually, I asked my wife if we could stop speculating about the poor guy and soon, we never spoke of him again.

Except of course, when we passed him on the road.

“There he is again,” we’d say – and we’d move on.

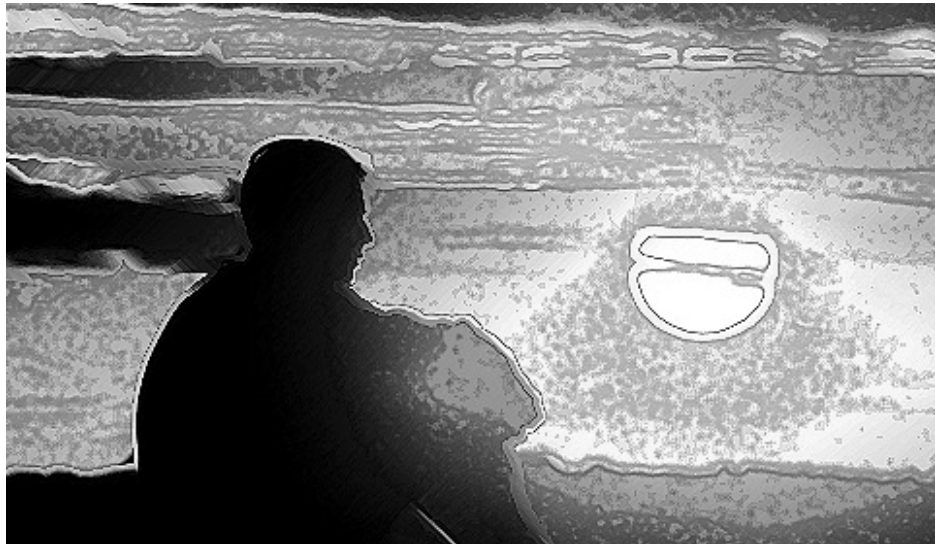
What were going to make for dinner? Plans to binge on Homeland that night? What about getting a sitter and seeing a movie?

Life – it moves – and soon winter fell away to the spring, and we were back again to summer.

Our Sunset Man remained – and as far as we could tell, he remained resolute to stay at his post and see the sky turn the many different colors that it does depending on the smog levels of the day.

The fact that we were and are in a drought hasn’t helped California. But it greatly enhanced those sunsets – into the fiery pinks and deep oranges, along with the hues of deep blue and purple.

Who wouldn’t swoon over our sunsets?



But the Sunset Man was never swooning – never blinking, never even seeming to breathe. He just was – as we are – as anything that is subject to the laws of nature.

We started to see him more and more when our daughter was old enough to be in the bicycle seat we purchased and began taking family rides around the neighborhood.

Every time we passed him, I felt compelled to say hi.

I felt it was rude not to acknowledge our neighbor.

But like always – there was no movement, no acknowledgement, nothing from the Sunset Man.

“Hi,” I said again, and this time, my daughter joined in: “Hello” she said in her best attempt to get past the baby babble.

And he turned around – as if his feet were connected to a Lazy Susan – he swiveled without effort, and without shifting his shoulders or arms.

The Sunset Man looked at my daughter with his signature squint.

“Hello, yourself,” he said.

And I nearly ran our bike into a parked car and sent my daughter and I to sprawling to the ground.

The look of shock on my face must have been noticeable – I’ll admit, I have big eyes that grow to half the size of my face when I am caught off guard.

They must have exploded behind my sunglasses.

“He spoke,” I whispered to my daughter.

“He thpoke,” my daughter mimicked.

“It’s a lovely night,” I heard my wife say to him from a few yards behind – as she caught up with us on her bike.

But the Sunset Man said nothing further and turned back to his position – hands behind his back, chin held high as he stared at the sun dropping in the sky.

“Do you think the key to get him talking is her?” I asked my wife later, as I dumped the boiled spaghetti into a strainer.

“You’re not using our daughter to pry into that strange guy’s life.” She said.

“But it makes perfect sense – you see, the Sunset Man is an angel, and he only notices the innocent ones. We’re too used up in this world, but she is brand new, untouched...”

I pointed to our daughter whose face was a mess of spaghetti sauce and mashed up garlic bread.

“She is the one who can learn the mystery.”

“No way, just talk to him – but keep our child out of it.”

“You can’t be serious? I’m joking...” I said...

But was I?

Part of me wanted to know what it was that the Sunset Man was waiting for – what he was seeing in the sky, day after day.

Where did he live? Did he work? Did he have dreams or goals? Why was he staring at that goddamn sun?

Goddamnit, I thought – this guy is taking up far too much time in my mind.

It had been almost a year since I first saw him – and I had passed him too many times on my bike, or with the dogs that I felt compelled to speak to him.

I knew that he wouldn’t talk to me – but if I pushed him just enough – he may break his silence.

My heart was beating out of my chest when I approached him that day, with my dogs in tow, sniffing and peeing wherever they wished to leave their scent.

The familiar hum of the radio towers drifted in and out of my ears as I walked along the sidewalk border – as I walked directly toward him, as he stood at his parade rest.

I could see his features – he must have been in his early twenties, with short brown hair to match his squinted hazel eyes – as he clenched his jaw – grinding his teeth.

“Hello,” I said.

The Sunset Man didn’t respond.

“Hello,” I said again with a bit more force.

“Hello,” he mumbled in return.

“I see you here all the time.”



He didn't respond, but shot his chin up a little bit higher, as if I had shaken the concentration out of him.

Maybe he was autistic, I thought? If I continued, I was just being mean. The man deserved his privacy.

"What do you see?"

I couldn't stop myself - I had to know. I just had to figure out what the Sunset Man was looking for.

Movement again, his eyes flickered as they caught a quick sideways glimpse of me.

"I've seen you here for almost a year now, you're here day in and day out. What is it you see?"

"Sunset," he mumbled...his voice was low, with that southern California drawl that most people in our state swear they don't have.

"I know...but what is it?"

The Sunset Man turned toward me - his face was now a mask of anger.

"I just like the sunset," he said, louder this time, annoyed.

"But you're here way before the sun sets..."

My heart was skipping beats now, and I was surprised to feel my own anger surging underneath my quickened breaths.

"Doesn't it kill your eyes?" I asked.

My dogs pulled at me, they wanted to head down the familiar street - to check on the mailboxes and tree stumps for the other neighborhood dogs "pee-mail."

"What does?" The Sunset Man asked.

"The sun, how you stare at it without sunglasses..."

The Sunset Man shook his head, "No."

"Look, I'm sorry to be pushy. But I see you here all the time, always in the same place, always staring at the sun before it drops...what do you see?"

The Sunset Man looked back at the sky as the colors grew in the atmosphere.

"You don't want to know..." He said.

"But I do."

"No, you don't."

The Sunset Man sighed and turned away from me. He walked with a brisk pace down the street to the intersection of Burbank and Bellaire.

Hitting the crosswalk button, he crossed the street and disappeared into the adjacent neighborhood.

I looked at the sun - there was nothing out of the ordinary. It was bright, my head hurt, and I felt like I blew it.

"I spoke to him," I said to my wife later that night.

"You didn't."

"He was very pleasant."

"Really?"

"No, that was sarcasm. He didn't like all of my questions."

"Well, of course he didn't. You probably came off as one of those Neighborhood Watch creeps. Good going!"

Shortly before falling asleep that night, I knew that what she said was right - I *had* come across as a pushy jerk. I had invaded the man's privacy - I had asked him to share his deepest thoughts, and I didn't even ask him his name.

I didn't even introduce myself...

I knew that if I did speak with him again, I would have to do my best to remain friendly, but curious. Could I do that?

It wasn't until late August when I found out – and finally had my conversation with the Sunset Man.

If I could take it back – I would, because after that initial conversation, I never saw the Sunset Man again.

That Friday, I hopped on my bike, while my wife and daughter scampered in the backyard with the new play-house we had gotten her a couple of days before.

I didn't take the dogs – I knew that if I were to truly speak to the Sunset Man, I would have to do it alone.

And just as I knew he would be – he was standing at a parade rest while the sun inched closer to the horizon.

I pedaled up to him and slowed to a stop.

“Hi,” I said. “It's me again...”

The Sunset Man didn't turn – but I knew that he had heard me, as his back straightened to make himself taller.

“I'm sorry if I got off on the wrong foot with you some time back. I just find you to be so compelling...that you come here day after day...”

I was rambling now – and yet, I was not being neighborly.

“I'm sorry, I should introduce myself...”

“Save it,” he said – his voice was firm and direct.

“Okay.” I responded.

“Do you really want to see what I'm looking for? Do you really want to know?”

“Yes,” I said – and it was true, I had never wanted to know more about anything than any other time in my life.

“What I am looking for is not in the sun...”

I stood next to him, and faced the western field at a parade rest. Hands behind my back, my chin held high.

“I am looking beyond the sun,” he said.

I looked up at the sun, and through my sunglasses I felt a terrible pain...it was so bright...

“Take off your sunglasses,” he said.

“No, that's crazy.”

“It isn't. It only works without sunglasses. Take them off.”

The Sunset Man was looking at me now, and his face, which had seemed so young in all the times I had walked or ridden past, in those brief moments where I had seen him speak to me or my daughter – all of the youth in his face and body disappeared in an instant.

His face was haggard, weathered, gray – with crow's feet that stretched out of his eyes and laid siege upon his skin.

But it was too late to turn back – I took the sunglasses off my face and stared directly at the sun.

“Now look beyond, look...”

And squinting my eyes as far as I could without voiding my vision – I saw what he was looking for – I saw what brought him here day after day.

A planet – bigger than our moon at its nearest perigee, bigger than any celestial

body I have ever seen with my naked eye came through behind the sun.

There was no need for a telescopic lens, or binoculars, or anything to enhance the vision, as my sight seemed to break through that shining barrier as the circular divide revealed itself in our atmosphere.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s the Dark Star,” he said. “And any day now it is going to open and swallow us whole.”

The Dark Star had a purple outline, but I could see that more color was growing along the border of its body.

“It’s an eye that is currently closed, but soon it will be opening upon this world, and as soon as it catches wind of us, we will be gone within its blink. My job is to call to it as soon as I see that it opens – before it sees us, I must acknowledge the presence, and prove our worth through a form of worship.”

The Sunset Man took a deep breath.

“But I don’t have to look for it anymore...there is someone new who can see it as well.”

The Sunset Man gripped my shoulder – it was gentle – as if he were thanking me for my persistence.

As I looked to him – his age had progressed – the skin of his face was cracking off in chunks and spreading dust into the wind. I could see the blood vessels in his arms and his throat – I could see the beating heart in his translucent chest.

As he was fading in front of me, he motioned my eyes back to the west.

“You must not let it out of your sight, you must be ready for it when the sun begins to hang low in the sky, you must catch the Dark Star as it opens. You must call to it with these three words...”

And he said no more – as his loving grip popped out of existence as the sun sank beneath the horizon and for a flash – just a moment, the Dark Star remained in all its glory – a giant circle in the sky – before it had faded as well.

Three words came to my mind – as if I heard them on the wind, as if they had burrowed into the grey matter and would not let go.

I know I cannot utter these words out loud – nor can I write them or share them with any other being.

If the Dark Star perceives a fraud, or false worship, then we are all doomed.

But I know that we are not – I know that I have such an important task – a task that will be mine until I can worship the Dark Star for all of humanity.

My wife has grown worried – she doesn’t know why I have to leave work early – why I prefer to stand alone, facing west – why I refuse to move away from the radio towers.

Why I have grown so distant, why I refuse to wear sunglasses, why my face is growing wrinkled – but am told how young I look though I continue to grow old.

All that I know is that I must remain resolute – I must stand at that parade rest.

I must – for the Dark Star will open any day now. ❖

# THE STUDY

by SONNY RAG

Ricky glanced across the room at the chimpanzee lounging on the couch. He could smell her breath from here, a stomach tweaking combination of apple and cigar smoke. The chimp caught him looking, rolled her lip and sucked air threateningly through her teeth. Ricky quickly looked back at his book, which he wasn't reading, but was using as a prop to get her to ignore him.

"They're ten times stronger than humans," Post-Grad. Assan had said. "So you shouldn't provoke her."

"Provoke her how?" Ricky asked. "What provokes a monkey?" Big frown at monkey.

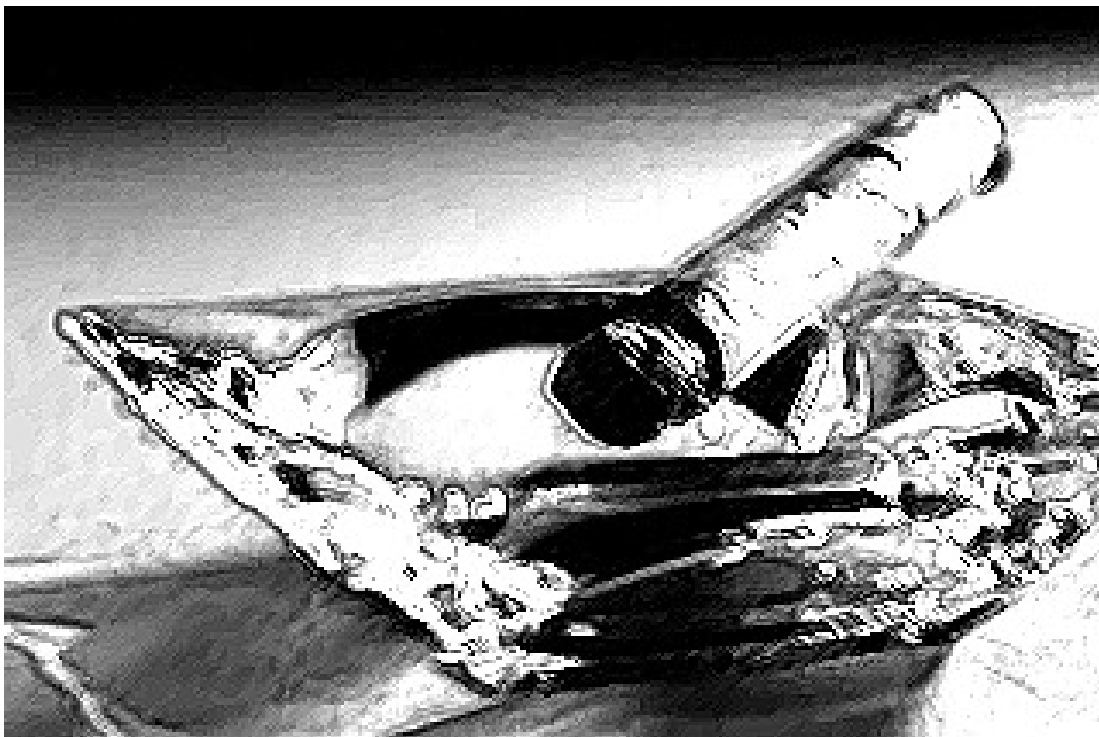
"That depends. She's the equivalent of a teen-ager by our standards. What provokes a teenaged human?"

Ricky frowned back. He couldn't imagine there was anything that *didn't* provoke a teenaged girl, but what he was really thinking was how Assan had asked the question with curiosity, as if he had no idea about girls, teenaged or otherwise.

"Forget it. Just remember that they're terrifically strong," the scientist-to-be said.

"Yeah, ten times." Ricky was looking at the bars of the cage containing the chimpanzee. They didn't seem strong enough.

"Well, maybe not this particular specimen," Assan said conversationally. "Like I



said, she's young. But, you're pretty flabby, so ten X probably still applies." Ricky looked up at the insult, but Assan apparently didn't mean anything by it. He was from Pakistan and though he had the American-idiom thing down pat, he didn't always grasp what was and wasn't the right thing to say.

So, she'd arrived at his apartment, brought by two other Pakistani doctoral candidates in primatology, and she wasn't happy. He'd tried to assuage her discomfort with fresh fruit and by paging up and down the satellite TV music channels, hoping to find something that kept her from screeching. Thank God she didn't like Classic C&W or Tejano, both of which were nails on a blackboard. What Ricky didn't know (but didn't want to A: search for Assan's business card and B: call and ask) was, "are the screeches approval or annoyance?" Ricky had booted his computer to Google

Chimpanzee comma Behavior, but the Windows log-on-theme caught her fancy, scooting over and shoving Ricky out of the way. The laptop was interesting until she had launched so many apps that it locked up. Pulling the top apart from the bottom killed the Dell and she was bored again.

The cigar was his fault. In the living room was an ashtray with half a *Romeo Y Julieta* in it, and she had sniffed at it, howling. Oh, well, it wasn't on the no-no list Assan had provided. Ricky lit it up with an Ohio Blue-tip and she snatched it from his hand. It was obviously not her first. Now there was a pall of smoke above her head, and he hoped that she didn't decide to open the refrigerator, from which she had seen him extract the apples, but which contained beer, mostly. He was pretty thirsty, but he'd been on dates with drunk chicks before and, well, *damn*. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**