

CRASH
By Patrick Tobin
Short Fiction

Herbert Strathorn, Ph.D. opens his office door and I'm struck by his cheerful eyes and his shiny bald head—put him in a robe and stick him on top of a donkey and you've got Friar Tuck. I'm already starting to feel better.

I follow him into his office. "Well," I take a deep breath, "the problem—Jenny told you about my problem, right?"

"She sure did."

"It started about six months ago—"

Dr. Strathorn holds up his hand. "Sam, I practice behavior modification."

"Right." I always say "right," even when I don't know what the person is talking about.

"We're not going to *talk* about your problem." He makes hand puppet motions that signal endless yammering and his smile fades, into a peeved grin.

"I hear about your mommy and your daddy. You had trouble pooping in the toilet, nobody liked you in junior high. Blah, blah, blah."

"Right."

"Of course I'm right." Dr. Strathorn breaks out into a childish giggle that startles me. "You want to solve your problem today?"

I nod.

”Then let’s go, big guy.” The doctor grabs his car keys. ”We got work to do.”

I sit in Herbie’s Miata, in the driver’s seat. It’s cherry red and I’ll be frank—I’m worried. I’d pegged Herbie for a Lexus, or maybe a BMW. Definitely not a tiny sports car. I’m worried now because I don’t do well with unpredictability. Unpredictability is just a harbinger of bad things to come—*very* bad things, like the sun going supernova or movies of the week starring former Olympic athletes.

I grip the steering wheel so hard that my palms and fingers feel anesthetized.

“*This* is a tool that makes my life easier,” Herbie recites. “I have freedom in my life because of *this* car.” Herbie makes indulgent nods with his head, as if I’m hearing impaired or retarded.

“Yes.”

“Repeat—”

“Listen, Dr. Strathorn, I’m already feeling a lot better.”

“Good. Then you won’t have any problem starting the car.” He hands me the keys.

The gesture seems like a dare and I want to run away. I move my legs so the muscles can plan an escape route.

Herbie puts a CD in the stereo. A saxophone plays, in such an antiseptic, cloying manner that I imagine this is how shrink-wrapped gift baskets would sound if they could sing.

“Listen to the soothing music, Sam. We can wait here as long as it takes.”

The thought of having to listen to Kenny G. longer than necessary proves to be an incredible motivator.

The engine turns over and roars to life. I put the car in neutral and lift up the parking brake.

“Feelings?” Herbie turns himself in his seat, so he’s almost facing me.

“I feel like something horrible is going to happen.” I’m also feeling the keen lack of personal space in the Miata.

“Has anything bad happened so far?”

Cramped knees notwithstanding, I have to confess that nothing has gone wrong. I put the car in reverse and back up.

“Excellent!” Herbie pats me on the shoulder. “*You* are doing excellent!”

I brighten and my posture immediately improves. I’m the type of person who overreacts to even the faintest praise with a desperate, lab-rat-pushing-the-crack-lever eagerness.

“Really? Thanks,” I gush, adding about fifteen exclamation points to my voice.

I maneuver the car to the driveway and that’s when the bad—the really, really bad—feelings start. Like I’m having an out-of-body experience. I consider telling Herbie what I’m experiencing, but I imagine him pulling out the big guns—like Yanni or Enya—or worse, withdrawing his approval. I keep my mouth shut.

I’ve locked my gaze in front of me. I think my wrists have turned white—gangrenous, really, but my gaze is locked in front of me so I can’t confirm that. My mouth has stopped producing saliva. We come to a stop sign and I nervously glance over at Herbie.

“Very good, Sam. You’re doing very well. You’re in control.”

“Am I?”

I misjudge the clutch and the car almost dies. I panic and pull off to the side of the road, where I put the car in neutral.

“I can’t do this. We’re going to be in a horrible accident, I just know it. You’ll have to drive back.”

Herbie grabs me by the arm to prevent me from jumping out. “Deep breaths, Sam. Deep breaths.”

“I’m going to pass out!”

“No you’re not. Look at me Sam. Look at me.”

I look at Herbie. His smile is a little odd, and there’s a menacing glint off his waxy-smooth pate. That’s when I notice that his penis is sticking out of his open fly.

“Oh my God!”

“Deep breaths, Sam. Really, *really* deep breaths—”

He grabs my hand and presses it down into his lap. My fingers brush against his member and I’m horrified by its velvety smooth, uncircumcised hood. I’m more horrified by the fact that I’m thinking “member” and “velvety smooth uncircumcised hood” at a time like this, because it means my mental processes have been lexicologically ruined by bad porn.

“Stop this! Are you crazy?”

“You vixen!” Herbie says in between guttural breaths.

He makes a move towards my lap. At first nothing registers, since I’m still processing that I, a forty-six year old man, have just been called a vixen. Then he pries at my zipper with stubby, malevolent fingers. I push him away and my foot slips off the clutch.

My thigh grazes the gear shift.

We lurch into a parked car in front of us and there’s a terrible crunch of metal and glass. I imagine a river of unleashed gasoline and turn off the engine.

Kenny G. starts skipping and Herbie tucks in his shirt. I jump out of the car and walk towards Ventura Boulevard. Okay, so I’m a bit of a drama queen. At first I try walking like Jodi Foster in “The Accused.” Post-rape trauma and blank stare. I quickly become bored with my shoddy performance and put a stop to it when I realize no one is running up to me with concern, no “Oh my God, what happened to you?” or “Somebody call an ambulance, this man has been flashed by a mental health professional!”

I walk past at least a dozen Vietnamese nail salons and saltwater aquarium stores and another dozen or so shops that sell gyros sandwiches and ginseng products. I start to shift into my “what the fuck is LA coming to?” mode, but even that comfortably familiar mantra doesn’t do the trick right now. I pass a bus stop bench. The ad on it is for a personal injury attorney whose toll free number spells out “Let’s Sue.” Should I sue Dr. Strathorn? Should I call the State Board and report him?

I go into a donut shop and buy a dry bear claw and a Diet Dr. Pepper. I park my tired ass in a corner booth. Apparently the owners of the shop decided to glaze the table top with maple

frosting so I shift to another table. I pick up a three-year-old “People” magazine and read an article about the Simpson trial lawyers and what they’re doing with themselves.

I like Marcia Clarke’s new hairstyle. It becomes her.

I finally get home, after a bus trip that involves four transfers, and I immediately call Jenny. Jenny is responsible for my appointment with Herbert Strathorn, Ph.D. I love Jenny to death and I know she feels the same about me, but to be honest, her help with my problem has not been entirely altruistic. She’s one of those women who gets divorced, then surrounds herself with losers whose problems make hers seem insignificant in comparison. I’ve become—in her mind—her best friend because six months ago I stopped driving. Everyone who hears this assumes I was in a horrible, life-altering accident and they start looking surreptitiously for scars. Their eyes light up in anticipation of a gory story about metal plates and missing digits.

But I wasn’t in an accident. I wasn’t in anything. I simply stopped driving because every time I got into my car I panicked. Generally I feel *panic* is an overused, meaningless word in this era of victim-based disorders, that by the time an Osmond claims to suffer from some syndrome it’s become the psychological equivalent of a beauty queen’s acceptance speech. But in my case *panic* is appropriate. The minute I get behind the steering wheel I become ridiculously paralyzed with fear—the fear unfolds itself upon me like a big bolt of black crepe, filled with the doom.

I fix myself a scotch and soda while Jenny listens to the Herbie episode. There’s a long pause after I get to the part about his penis.

“I’m going to kill that cocksucker,” she finally says. Jenny’s universe is neatly divided into “living saints” and “cocksuckers.” It’s the only way she can make any sense out of life.

“Why? I was the one who was violated.” I’m trying to paint myself more victimized than I’m actually feeling. It’ll give me a valuable one-up on Jenny at some point down the road.

“I spent a half hour on the phone with that cocksucker going over his credentials. He went to Harvard, for chrissake!”

“Perverts don’t graduate from Ivy League schools?”

Jenny ignores my sarcasm. “Too bad you can’t sue him.”

“Why not? I’ve got the name of an attorney—“

“I know what I’m talking about. Juries don’t want to hear about it unless you’re some broad who wakes up during hypnosis with a dick her mouth. The rule of thumb with personal injury nowadays: would that cocksucker Nancy Grace cry if she interviewed you.”

Jenny doesn’t work. She doesn’t have to, her divorce settlement was in the high six figures, so she spends most of her free time at the downtown courthouse observing trials. I hate to admit it, but her words have the ring of authority.

“Listen, Sam, maybe this is a sign.” Jenny’s voice goes quiet and dramatic.

“How’s that?”

“I was talking with my friend Annette, the one who’s a nurse at Cedars—remember her?”

I know exactly who Annette is. She was Jenny’s “best friend” about three years ago, after Annette’s 17-year-old stepdaughter pulled a boning knife on the family while they were at Legoland. That domestic drama kept Jenny distracted for months, until Annette and her husband finally put the young girl on Thorazine and sent her to a Mormon-affiliated in-patient program in Nehi, Utah. The last I’d heard the stepdaughter had sent Annette an apology letter and a macaroni and tissue paper portrait of Brigham Young.

Jenny continues. “Anyway, she’s a living saint, that woman. So I’m telling her about your situation and she tells me about this woman who came into the clinic with the same problem you’re having. The *exact* same problem. And you know what was causing it?”

“I give up.”

“A goddamned brain tumor.”

“What?!”

“A goddamned brain tumor, the size of a small eggplant. Pressing on the part of her brain that controls feelings, or something like that.”

For some reason, I can only think about the difficulty in preparing a really tasty eggplant

dish.

Jenny misreads my silence and sighs sympathetically. “I know, sweetie, I know. It’s scary and unfair.”

“I don’t have a brain tumor!”

“You don’t even smoke! All those cocksuckers who smoke all their lives and you—it’s just not fair.” I hear Jenny take a drag off her cigarette. “Did you ever live under power lines?”

“You made an appointment at Cedars for me, didn’t you?”

“Do you want me to pick you up? It’s tomorrow at five-thirty.”

“I’ll take a cab.” The last thing I want is Jenny at the hospital with me—the fear of death is making me less than gracious, and I don’t feel like indulging her need to rescue me. “I’ll do this alone, thank you very much.”

“I love you honey. I’ll be there for you. No matter what happens.”

I have a confession. I’m in a cab, on my way to Cedars Sinai to investigate a possible vegetable-sized tumor, reading “The Cancer Survivor’s Handbook” (Jenny messengered it to me last night), and I’m—happy. I’m happy because the cab company honored my request for a particular driver. Hrant is a second-generation Armenian from Glendale. He’s probably in his late twenties and is blessed with a perfect body. I’ve scanned him carefully with my visual calipers for excess body fat and I have yet to come up with an ounce. Hrant has driven me four times before and every time my hormones perform strange tribal dances.

I’m almost certain Hrant is straight, but he’s one of those men who flirts with everyone. It’s that smile of his, those perfect white teeth that flash secret coded messages at me, like “I know we have to play out these silly roles, but really, what I’d like more than anything is to ravish you, right here, right now.”

Hrant glances at me in the rearview mirror. “How about that Wimbledon final?”

I can bullshit sports with heterosexual men like nobody’s business, so I recount a few of the better games with precision. The whole while I marvel at the beauty of Hrant’s magnificent

biceps, the way they coyly flex when he turns the steering wheel. I decide I won't share with him the fact that I spent an entire Wimbledon semifinal with my eyes glued to Pete Sampras' ass.

"That Federer. He's something else." Hrant smiles and my imagination goes wild. Is he telling me he understands what I'm thinking? That he thinks Federer's ass is marvelous entertainment too?

"My girlfriend thinks he's hot, so I didn't watch the match with her," he says.

Hrant chuckles. I droop like tulips in June. I decide I'm going to punish this flirty young man with silence. I'm dying, after all, and he's going on about his girlfriend, who's probably some raven-haired beauty who makes fabulous lamb kabob and gives great blow jobs.

We reach Cedars and Hrant jumps out of the car to open my door. I hand him a twenty and tell him to keep the change. It's a showy gesture I admit, but really, what good is money to me now? Maybe this twenty will buy me an extra grieving guest at my memorial service. Besides, I'm much less pouty now that I'm about to face my destiny.

"I hope you feel better soon," Hrant tells me after a profusion of thanks.

Then—he pats me on the shoulder.

"Hang in there," he says before he gets in the cab. He smiles and it almost feels like a benediction.

I wait in the clinic for Jenny's friend Annette. The only other person in the waiting room is an older woman with thin lips, carefully traced with raspberry-colored liner. Her hair, her face, and her blouse are all milky white. I can't stop staring at her lips—they look like twisted strands of shiny Christmas ribbon. She's definitely not happy. About five minutes ago she threw down a four-year-old "Redbook" with a defeated sigh. I try to imagine what kind of tumor she has and I decide it's probably tomato-sized. I feel sympathetic, until I start an internal argument with myself about tomatoes and whether they're a fruit or vegetable. I know they're really a fruit, but it seems ridiculous and unnatural, like something Wolfgang Puck adjudicated at a nouvelle cuisine conference in the 80s.

Annette comes out into the waiting room. She appears puzzled when I practically leap up to greet her.

“I thought you were having trouble getting around,” she says.

“That’s an understatement,” I say.

The older woman suddenly looks interested and I feel a warm, unspoken camaraderie with her. We’re brave fighters, the two of us.

Annette leads me through a side door, down a long antiseptic hallway.

“Dr. Chen’s in emergency surgery this afternoon, but I went over your symptoms,” Annette hesitates slightly at the word *symptoms*, “and he thought we should get you in right away for an M.R.I. Is that okay?”

I nod, not really knowing what to say. This all is happening so fast and I’m not entirely sure what an M.R.I. is, as opposed to a CAT scan. My medical knowledge, I hate to admit, comes only from reruns of “ER.”

“Right.”

“It’s going to be okay, honey.” Annette pats me on the hand. “It’s amazing what we can do today.”

I sign a stack of forms. I think I’ve just signed my life away, literally and figuratively, but I’m a brave fighter. Yes. A brave little fighter.

I get into the disposable dressing gown—it must have been a paper towel in a truckstop bathroom during its previous incarnation. I distract myself by planning my deathbed scene. I decide that I want to die right after I’ve forgiven my gathered family for making my childhood a living hell. I’ll be gracious—so fucking gracious that they’ll feel like shit for the rest of their lives.

Annette has left me with a radiology technician named Barry. Barry is African-American and about my age—I base this solely on the fact that we have the same sprinkling of gray hairs. He smiles when I come back from the dressing room, in my gown that seems made of rice paper

and kite string. Barry is just about the most effeminate man I've run into in a long time, so I'm feeling a little better about this whole thing. At least there will be some campy repartee.

Then Barry mentions that he just got off the phone with his wife. "Women," he says. "Can't live with them. Can't live without them."

He says all this as if I understand perfectly.

"Women?" Barry must think my jaw hitting the floor is a symptom of my Stage 4 cancer.

"Aren't they something else?" he says with a giggle. "Okay, let's get this show on the road."

Barry sashays over to the M.R.I. machine, like RuPaul in scrubs. He punches some buttons and a narrow metal slab comes out from the sleek, beige tube. It looks like a sci-fi movie prop and an expensive one at that. This equipment would be in a movie with at least Drew Barrymore as the heroine, Donald Sutherland as the villain.

Barry asks me how much I weigh, a question I find as invasive as an unlubed index finger up my ass. I now hate this hopelessly closeted technician and try to convey my feelings through a belligerent gaze, even as I struggle to keep my genitals from tumbling out of the gown as I lie down.

Barry remains cheerful. He hits a button and the slab glides back into the machine. My shoulders are pressed against the walls of the tube and I'm convinced now I won't be able to breathe. It's a strange feeling, this claustrophobic fear that I'm going to die of imminent suffocation and the comforting soft, warm glow of light inside—I'm reminded of flying on jets late at night, when everything is peaceful and safe and the flight attendants are quietly laughing in the galley.

"Can you hear me?"

Barry's voice is piped into the machine. His mechanically muffled lisp sounds like a flamboyant pilot about to tell his passengers that Fire Island is off to the left of the plane.

"Right!" I yell back.

"You don't need to yell. I can hear you through the microphone."

“Right!” I yell even louder this time. I’m still pissed at Barry and I want him to know it.

The clicking starts. *Tocka, tocka, tock. Tocka, tocka, tock.* It’s like some Old-World toy is marching along the perimeter of the tube. I’m thinking this isn’t so bad after all. In fact, I’m feeling rather smug now, after all the horror stories I’d heard about CAT scans and M.R.I.s during lunch at the office. I wonder if my triumph would be more complete if I go into work tomorrow and act as if this wasn’t a big deal, or if I really play it up for all it’s worth.

The clicking stops and I snuggle into the tube, imagining the admiration that will beam from my co-workers’ faces either way. A moment later comes a crushing cacophony of sledgehammers and particle accelerators and planet-sized asteroids slamming into the shells of spaceships. Now I realize why Barry gave me ear plugs and I feel like an idiot. The universe’s idiot.

The torment suddenly stops. My ears ring and my brain hisses internally with the sound of Mongolian barbecue. At least it’s over, I tell myself. It’s over and I can go home and mourn my cancer over a fifth of scotch.

”This next round will only take fifteen minutes.”

Barry’s lisp doesn’t irritate me anymore. I’m now terrified of him and my mind starts to race. Have I stopped breathing? Is there any way out of this torture chamber? What if I pass out? What if I die? Will they just bury me in this fucking plastic bottle because they can’t squeeze me out?

Barry gives me a Xanax and now we’re best friends. He may be in the closet, but how can you not love someone who dispenses lifesaving tranquilizers? He’s saved my life and I hug him effusively. I get into my civilian clothes and wobble back to the clinic to say goodbye to Annette. Again, she gives me a strange look when I walk into the waiting room.

“You’re walking like a trooper,” she says.

“Hardly.”

I sit down to gather my strength. “Annette, this woman that you and Jenny were talking

about, how bad was her panic?”

“When she found out about the cancer?”

“Well, no, not really. I mean, before that. Like me.” I mime driving and simultaneously flipping out. It’s a performance that would rate a D minus in Stage Movement 101.

Annette cocks her head like a housecat sizing up a large parrot.

“When Jenny said you couldn’t get around anymore, was she talking literally—” Annette mimes using crutches. “Or was she talking figuratively?”

Jenny, of course, has many excuses when I call her later. The most important, in her mind, is that Annette is a cocksucker who doesn’t pay attention.

“I don’t give a shit if your stepdaughter’s schizophrenic, you still need to listen to people. That’s probably why the poor girl went crazy like she did.”

I decide I simply don’t have the energy for confrontation. “Hey, at least I’ve got some lovely slides of my brain and neck.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Make them into a Christmas card.”

“The driving, Sam. The driving. You’ve got to find a way to stop being a victim.”

Her words make me furious, the way all New Age platitudes enrage me when they’re even remotely correct. “Maybe I need to find a *real* therapist.”

Jenny ignores my outburst and the barb at Dr. Strathorn. “I think that’s an excellent idea! In fact, do you remember my friend Monique? A living saint, that girl. She just got her masters in counseling from National University—”

I hang up. When Jenny calls back a minute later, I pretend that my phone’s acting up. I muffle my voice and make crackling noises, before finally hanging up again. Jenny doesn’t call back.

I have the best sleep I’ve had in weeks.

Annette just left me a polite, terse message. My insurance plan is playing hardball and the clinic isn't going to eat the cost of the M.R.I. Those Christmas cards of my insides? They're going to cost me about five hundred dollars. I can't afford a therapist now, so I call the Gay and Lesbian Center to see if I can get some free counseling. I'm given an appointment in a week to see a psychologist named Doreen. Jenny has left seven messages and I still haven't called her back.

Hrant drives me to the Center. He's been awfully quiet the whole ride. His gorgeous trapezoids seem almost, I don't know, drooping under some kind of psychic burden. I finally tell him that I'm not going to die after all. He lifts those dark eyes, so dark they're like staring into deep space through a billion dollar telescope, and he gives me a pleased look. I feel like a starving child grasping at table scraps.

I'm ashamed.

Hrant sighs. "Life is funny."

"How's that?"

"One minute you're scared and thinking the worse, the next minute you're happy. Like you. Me, I'm the opposite."

Hrant's pain fills the cab with diffuse melancholy, like a perfume sample unleashed from a magazine. I'm at a complete loss for words.

He shrugs. "My girlfriend left me."

I look out at the passing shops along the street as if I expect one of them to have a sign in front with the perfect words to say to Hrant. Going out of business sale. Everything must go. Name your price, we're in a mood to deal.

I finally just say—"I'm sorry."

We reach the Center and Hrant doesn't open the door for me. I hand him some bills when I realize he's got tears in his eyes. I want to do something to acknowledge his grief, so I decide to place a hand on his shoulder—that rippled shrine to masculine power. I'm about to say

something—something trite like “It’ll get better”—but Hrant places his hand on mine and I keep my mouth shut. He does too. Is he grateful? Does he find my physical display objectionable? There’s no clue in his eyes.

“Thanks,” he finally says. He means it.

I watch Hrant drive away. I begin to think it’s one of those great, bittersweet movie moments, except he’s stuck behind a Sparklett’s delivery truck for what seems like an eternity. Hrant exchanges curses with the deliveryman and they flip each other off.

Doreen leads me into her office, a cramped non-profit space that smells of vanilla candles and camphor. Doreen is a dead ringer for Geraldine Ferraro, but without Ms. Ferraro’s forced air of populist goodwill circa October 1984. I don’t know why I’ve developed such an instant antipathy towards her. It might be because she reminds me of a group of older lesbians I once met in Laguna Beach: dark Anne Klein slacks, Izod polo shirts, gruff handshakes, AA pins announcing sixty days of sobriety, O’Doul’s beer and watery guacamole. *No* sense of humor. I showed up with a penis and a bottle of expensive merlot—from the reaction I got, you’d have thought I showed up with dismembered kittens for everyone.

“What’s the problem, Sam?”

It feels like Doreen is *trying* to be empathetic, probably rehearsing her words in her head. I pause for a moment. I can tell Doreen is impatient and I’m a freebie, after all, so I feel an obligation to perform. I decide to tell her the story about the M.R.I. fiasco. I’ve told it to so many people at work that I know just the right pause before saying “now I have a five hundred dollar Christmas cards of my insides.” The pause is crucial, as it means the difference between a coffee-spraying laugh and a polite chuckle.

Doreen listens, but it’s with seamless, dispassionate, clinical boredom.

“And of course the insurance company is refusing to pay,” I say. I’m practically vomiting enthusiasm, I’m so determined to win over this woman with the Soviet demeanor. “So—” I pause for one and a half seconds. “Now I have a five hundred dollar Christmas cards of my

insides.”

Ba dump ba.

I pause, waiting. I wait. And I wait. Doreen doesn't laugh. She crosses her legs and sits there with pursed lips. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, no one can really purse lips like a lesbian.

”You know the thing about sarcasm, Sam?” Doreen looks like she wants to toss her notepad in the garbage can.

“What?”

“It's a wall we hide behind.”

“Right.”

“I'm not asking you to agree with me.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be sorry.” Doreen uncrosses her legs and takes a deep breath. “I've found that I can't be of much help to clients when they're sarcastic. So I guess the question is, do you want to tell me what's wrong or don't you?”

I don't know what to say. The clock on the wall ticks, each second adding to my growing shame. I feel a need to be honest with Doreen, borne out of the same childish fear that will make me an incredible nark if the opportunity ever presents itself. I start composing in my head the words I'd want to say to her. What I *really* want to ask her is—is there any point to life—but I sense that this question, that's been plaguing me for months, maybe even years, will sound smarmy. *Of course* it will sound smarmy. The only people who get away with questions like that are Nobel Prize-winning writers from Portugal and public access evangelists. I want to tell her I'm not a sarcastic person, I just want to know. I want to ask her if all we do is drive around waiting to crash into something. Anything. I want to ask her if we drive around until we realize that ten years have gone by. Twenty years. I want to ask her why the years go by so fucking quickly, so fucking quietly. I want to ask why time seems like a nurse in a hospice, walking around all the dying people without a sound, because if she made a sound the dying people

would realize that they really *are* dying.

Because sometimes, Doreen, I want to say, I feel like throwing myself under a fucking bus. What's the answer, babe, cause you look like you got all the answers.

Is that sarcasm or desperation?

Doreen has just glanced at the clock for the fifth time and I know if I don't say something immediately she is going to ask me to leave. I realize that I can't have an existential crisis with a woman who desperately wants her fifty minutes of charitable service to be over. I wonder if she's burned-out, bored with her own life. I suspect, from the honesty-at-all-costs vibe I'm getting from her, that she specializes in coming-out crises and substance abuse, in which case my middle-age drama wouldn't be particularly interesting anyway. I'm about to get up and leave when I notice something in Doreen's eyes—a kind of shy apprehension. It's barely perceptible, like when you accidentally notice an ant in the lawn, and then you see them, the little ant's comrades, and they're teeming in the blades of grass that just moments before had been a still mat of green. This hesitation, this “what kind of hand is life dealing me?” look—I bet Doreen spends a lot of effort hiding it.

I feel a wave of sympathy for her that could quickly become heartbreaking if I don't do something about it. I decide to throw her something she can sink her teeth into.

“Okay, here's the deal. I wasn't potty trained until I was five.” I'm lying, but I say the words with real gusto.

Doreen crosses her legs and puts her pen to her pad. The fire of purpose is in her eyes. “Tell me more, Sam. Don't be ashamed. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

I feel great. And all the while, I wonder if the cab company will give me Hrant's address so I can send him a Christmas card. A five hundred dollar Christmas card.