



PROLOGUE

God Games — Idols and Ideals — The White Oz

SAY TO YOURSELF, *I AM GOD*.

That's right. Imagine it.

Now, do some tricks, try out Your powers.

Hide in a far *Nothing* at the edge of light. Drift near Far Tortuga in a leaky turtle boat. Melt an icecap, craft a crop circle, have sex with a virus—etc.

Now, go to the city of Washington and read a few minds. Pick up a copy of the *Post*. Hang out in a senatorial *hideaway* with an oil or weapons lobbyist. Try to reconcile the biases, irrationalities, and politics You encounter there into something that makes sense for the good of all.

In other words, try to un-Babel this city . . .

You cannot.

It is impossible, even for You. Being all-powerful, You have “created” a place even You will never sort out.

Short of flaming snakes from the sky (at least twice a week), two worlds will always prevail in Washington and trump all Godlike efforts: the *World of Idols* and the *World of Ideals*.

If contrast is necessary to resolve doubt, or if you are unable to decide which *World* is more important to Washington, nix the God imitation. Buy a ticket, and come autumn, fly to the city. Stay there for days, weeks, whatever it takes. Stroll around and compare the *Worlds*. Glide like the ghost of Thomas Paine or Clara Barton beneath the power-aired vaults of the Supreme Court. Cup your hands in the starry black Reflecting Pool. Stroke the faces of marble head in the Capitol and touch the shimmering surface of the White House. See your own soul in the architecture of hope. Then at dawn, call room service. Order Eggs Norwegian, kiwi fruit on the side, black



coffee, and a Bloody Mary with lime. Eat and drink slowly as you gaze from your balcony across the Potomac over the acres of dome, obelisk, and temple winnowed out dark by the morning sun. At such time you will feel dazed, and it will appear to you that this Grand Republic Babylon of *Idols* (and partisans), this White Oz of *Ideals* (and fools), is none other than the fabled Atlantis itself, a rumored utopia restored from the ocean strata and made to assume its rightful station as an omphalos of the cosmos awaiting extinction once more.

If you try to inhale it, or realize its synergy, you will find it impossible. The human mind cannot grasp *Infinity*, and neither can it contain Washington. Only by creating a God, or a president, do things begin to anchor. Each generation demands an idol, and sometimes more than one, worship always preferable to despair.





CHAPTER 1

Morlocks and Star Eyes — A Bad Boss Stereotype — Blue Balls at St. E's — A Memorable Whistleblower — Golden Nadir — The Guy From Epanoma

EVEN BEFORE THE AGE OF THIRTY, Manny Eden's liberal politics and smartass nature improved his years of incarceration at one of America's most renowned mental institutions, and as a result, he was denied many things, including the solace of hope, Hell, God, and comfort food. Early one Tuesday morning in 1992, while reclined upon a vomit-smelling couch in the St. Elizabeth's day room, he stared up at an old RCA television suspended from the ceiling, his neck beginning to ache as he watched Tom Wolfe on the comedy show, *Saturday Night Live*.

"SHEEEEEOOIMEEEEEAMUGGERRRRFUGGERRRAWWWTHURR"

Wolfe yelled at the camera. He couldn't help but dapper about the set in his usual slappy white suit, his aging face puckered and supercilious, his body dodging water balloons hurled at him from off stage. Manny wondered if the face came naturally to Wolfe or if he wore it for theatrical show.

"SHEEEEEOOIMEEEEEAMUGGERRRRFUGGERRRAWWWTHURR"

Wolfe spewed again. Someone must have told him to make fun of the opening of his latest novel. Why? Because it also contained a long and bizarre sound that made no sense. The sketch bored Manny, but Wolfe's face never changed, not even when a bucket of chocolate-like bilge poured onto his suit from above. *"SHEEEEEOOO... yechk!"* The studio audience guffawed at the vision of a bilge-splattered Wolfe. The author spit at them, winked, and the TV cut to a commercial of a fat black poodle on two legs strip-dancing to the rock song *Losing My Religion* by REM. The fur fell away piece by piece as the dog transmogrified



into Sammy “Pink Bone” Bartowski—a wealthy pet dealer from Chevy Chase with a mouth big enough to swallow a litter in one gulp.

Manny flipped Pink Bone off and lowered his head, rubbing his neck as he looked around. The day room was quiet, only Belinda Hearn, the ex-mayor of D.C., using hands to act out her latest Spanish Inquisition fantasy on an imaginary bureaucracy. Manny knew that St. E’s nursing staff would soon treat her nail wounds with raw alcohol and tape her fingers to palm while she screeched as if tortured.

Feeling restless, and tired of reruns, Manny stood and walked to a window that overlooked the St. E’s grounds in Washington, D.C. It was still early in the morning, around 7 AM. Outside, the lawn engineers from El Salvador chopped and hosed, tidying up shrubbery and flowers beneath the glare of Venus. Manny saw the planet in the eastern sky, like distant car headlights atop a blue mountain. For some reason, it reminded him of his status as a true prisoner of Earth, and he said quietly to himself:

Let the asteroid hit.

The thought wasn’t original, placed in his mind long ago by the fated and righteous woman he loved. And he had no choice but to agree. The world of the nineties was stupid, cyclical, and fucked. NATO fought the Serb genocide squads, Africa bled itself to bone in civil war, South America burned in poverty, the Party elite of China tightened their death grip, and the author Tom Wolfe entertained America by dodging water balloons and taking on bilge.

What could be worse?

Before he could answer, a scuff of shoe on tile disturbed him. Manny turned to see the soft blond face of a man who had shot an American president. Fifteen minutes later, the two of them were playing chess in a large and dimly lit utility closet just off the day room. As usual, John Hinckley teased Manny about his past, made fun of his beliefs and enthusiasms, till Manny said,

“Shut the fuck up, Johnny.”

Manny knew he must be playfully harsh with John, otherwise he would just keep jabbering and poking like he did every time they played chess. St. E’s had pushed new meds on him, so he was much better than in the old days when he fixated on Jodie Foster.





“No medications will ever help you, Manny,” said Hinckley.

“Shut the fuck up, Johnny.”

“We’re both diseased and your disease is *outlook*. You’re no different than when you landed in D.C. ten years ago to kiss the Gipper’s ass.”

“That’s crap, Johnny, and besides, the two of us are nothing alike.”

“But we both love the women who imprisoned us. No?”

Manny’s blood pressure whistled in his ears. He resisted an urge to tip the game board into Hinckley’s lap—the fellow was pushing his hot button again. Why did he let him do it? The women referred to were Jodie Foster, the actress of course, and Manny’s murdered love of years past, Laney Dracos—a woman whose spirit warmed and defended him at St. E’s. He noted her presence in his St. E’s journal, and only the day before she’d told Manny’s most loved psychiatrist, Doc Blue Balls, where to stick his latest conclusion:

St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, May 22, 1992

Laney Dracos moved my mouth yesterday, just after lunch. She told Blue Balls to go fuck himself following his monthly evaluation of me as an incurable sociopath. No surprises there. Course, Blue Balls didn’t like it, smiled at me real cold, but I’m not escaping this mental health dungeon regardless. Even after all these years Laney still makes me feel like the crazed Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, the scene where he throws open the window to call to the ghost of his Catherine. Only in my case, Laney is fused to my nerves and thought, as if I were so consumed that I have, at least in part, become her—and unknown to the therapists at St. E’s, the best part of me is Laney. They can’t name it, but being followers of Sigmund they want to expose it and remake it into something sick and harmful. I’ll hold out though because I love her beyond their ability to comprehend. In other words, she’s dead and I refuse to move on. Is that clinical? I don’t think so, especially not in a place where the guy behind you at the water fountain claims to be the reincarnation of Mary, Queen of Scots.



4 ~ YEAR OF THE RHINOCEROS

In other news, last night I dreamt the mad poet
Ezra Pound stalking the halls of St E's, curs-
ing America. He woke me up around three, after
I shouted at him to return to his cage.

God of sorry bastards, protect me.

And so it went. But there were good times also. When not struggling with staff, Laney Dracos proclaimed her goodness and wisdom till Manny made demon love to her on the shore of his imagination—she appearing like his old vision of an American poster goddess from WW I, only a bit wilder: her hair free and dark as a Virginia night, her eyes brightening to moons above the Chesapeake, yet always a star-dimming blue by dawn, while her face in contrast to that purity looked sassy and Hollywood, and at times, more needful and sadly tragic than she would ever admit.

Regardless, Manny knew he must not give Hinckley an edge.

“Not true, Johnny, now shut the fuck up. Checkmate in three.”

While Hinckley sweated his next move for minutes on end and made insect-like clickings with his mouth, a bored Manny hit rewind, to relive his strange days with Laney, and just as importantly, his love of The Gipper in the eighties—a time when a great many star-eyed youth like himself left their hometowns and herded to the White Oz of Washington. Fed with hope, lies, and videotape campaign pledges, the kids had come from all points, from as close as Georgetown University and from as far away as American Samoa. Like Manny, their ambitions and enthusiasm were channeled into thoughts of change, productive and peaceful revolution, their backgrounds of Key Club civics and valedictorian speech demanding nothing less. Like rabid baseball fans full of stats, they chatted the nuances and quirks of government and its many personalities, and unlike the average bureaucrat or American, quoted Jefferson and Chomsky with equal skill, bragged of points scored and votes received in playful college games of Congress, and became giddy at the prospect of accidentally meeting The Gipper on a White House tour. They took the form of high school grads and college kids, nerds and quarterbacks, honor rollers and cheerleaders, Evangelicals and Humanists, young Republicans and Democrats, chess clubbers and pro-



wrestling fans—the most dedicated America could send. Driven and incredibly naive, they were willing to lick stamps or join in idol-worship at a moment's notice.

In other words, like Manny—obsessed.

Surprisingly though, upon settling down in the Grand Republic Babylon, they often found estrangement to be the norm. The *World of Ideals* was not their own. No sooner did they compare their notions of democracy to the motives of bureaucracy than panic would set in.

How could these poor “Star Eyes” have prepared?

First, to imagine oneself destined for things more useful and immortalizing, and then, days or weeks or months later, to be rudely confronted by those who contradicted and denied all belief, who classified themselves as the “realists,” created for the young people a circumstance worse than demoralizing. Like Morlocks of *The Time Machine*, their dream killers belonged to an underworld of dark and petty carnivores, also known as federal managers.

If the rest of America could have been there, during the eighties, they would have seen how these Morlock types forced the thousands of Star Eyes to either flee the city, submit and join the Yes-Mammal Nation (also known locally as “Star Base Brown-Noser Alpha”), or else resist as whistleblowers, and fail.

If *only* America could have been there.

* * *

THE MOST MEMORABLE AND INFAMOUS Star Eye who *was* there, Manny Eden (middle name Achan, pronounced *â-ken*), considered himself no different than the others—his goal back then to secure a reason for being. And what did this mean? Helping his country in a selfless way while serving his boyhood idol, The Gipper. What else? Young Eden was a true democrat, and the son of a liberal activist mother, though a political hybrid not usually seen east of Sacramento. Nevertheless, in 1984, at some point between the discovery of AIDS and the film debut of *This Is Spinal Tap*, he fled his hometown of Kenosha,





Wisconsin, to find a career in Washington, and like the thousands before him who had landed in that city for the first time, he felt afraid and powerdazed.

Only months before, he'd been fired from his crappiest job ever at the Burger Chef in downtown Kenosha for whistleblowing to district manager Bob Shorts about his boss's failure to wipe the cheese blocks clean of bug larva. Just when things couldn't get worse, an article in *Newsweek* magazine levitated him to the status of hero.

The "Office of Whistleblower Counsel" (OWC) had come into being: a special agency created by a Democrat Congress (*Civil Service Reform Act of 1978; Public Law 95-454*) to enable brave whistleblowers to safely defend their nation against bad bosses and criminal acts of government. And even though a Republican, The Gipper applauded, giving a speech at the agency and shaking hands with the new agency head, Ashley W. Madison, the two of them smiling and backslapping—course, the agency had started a few years before under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, but after standing up and falling a few times, it was really ready to get going!

As Counsel Madison said at the ceremony (according to *Newsweek*):

"I could not be more pleased that President Reagan has chosen me to lead such an important mission to protect the American people from the harmful practices of bad government. Our men and women of conscience must be free to speak out. The Constitution of the United States gives them that right, and if we deny this basic freedom we become nothing but a government of yes persons, and such a government can never benefit a freedom loving nation."

Finally, someone gave a damn! As *Newsweek* pointed out, it was all part of The Gipper's plan to reform Washington. He promised America, and he wouldn't let the people down. In response, Counsel Madison publicly called for workers from around the country and all across the political spectrum to help him succeed in his "brave, new mission."

How could a Gipper-dazed, jobless, honest liberal resist?



Manny called the OWC personnel office in Washington at least a dozen times, received contradictory information more than once, and after a resume polish (that included accomplishments at the University of Wisconsin rather than his loser Kenosha jobs), and a criminal background check that lasted nearly a month, he made peace with a saddened mother and booked his flight to Washington D.C. for the job interview.

Days later, at the O'Hare terminal in Chicago, a tearful Mommy K (his mother's nickname) smiled and kissed her son. *I love you, Manny Eden*, she said, and added, "If it doesn't work out, I can probably get you a job at Ed's Plant Emporium in Milwaukee. Just a plan b, cause you never know, hmm?"

A speechless son gave Mommy K a corpse-like grin and ran to catch his plane, the cactus of Ed's pricking him to extra effort.

He could hardly wait to get to Washington.

Upon arrival he herded through the White House, puffed to the peak of the Monument, breathed rotunda till it made him giddy, gawked at the Smithsonian's Tyrannosaurus, then quietly parked himself across the Potomac at the Rosslyn Marriott, ordered a Bloody Mary with lime, and soon enough, the opportunity to land his Washington dream job arrived.

Of course, he was determined not to blow it, but only ten minutes into the interview with an OWC federal executive at Cafe Artaud on 19th Street and Manny asked himself:

What kind of assholes do they forget to wipe around here?

* * *

IN HIS WHOLE TWENTY-TWO YEARS, Manny Eden had never met a man like this. First of all, Mr. Basil R. Hunsecker acted and looked the stereotypical bad boss: a middle-aged prick in three-piece gray and tacky pink tie who disturbingly resembled Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon* (narrow head and brooding Italian look), only an older version, with a thinner face, pock-marked cheeks, and big, protruding, blue-bone eyes that sucked in everything and contrasted in an irritat-



ing way with his sallow brown skin—as if he were the victim of one too many spray tans. His odor, somewhat unique, like cooked shellfish marinated in mildew. What Manny didn't know was that Hunsecker remained the owner not only of a rare, painful, and mummifying disease that ate away the body fat between his skin and muscles, but also of more than one post-pubescent social trauma, his memory way to full of punky kids screeching at him:

Hey, pizzaaa face, you fucking shithead pizzaaa face!

Of course, it wasn't Manny's fault, but beyond Hunsecker's eyes of fuzzy blue, he mulled over a single best opportunity for revenge—the subject occupying this stereotype every day of his life, and whether he realized it or not.

“Who are you smirking at, Mr. Eden?”

“It's just my face. I was born that way.”

“Are you a registered Republican?”

“Uh, no . . . I'm not registered yet, but I did vote for—”

“Are you Jewish?”

“My mother is Jewish . . . my father—”

“Died in a boating accident on Lake Michigan when you were only five. He drowned himself looking for you in the water, dived down so deep he couldn't make it back.”

Manny's face shivered as if slapped. “How did you know?”

“I know what Uncle Sam knows. Remember, we did a background check on you.”

“Yes, sir,” Manny said and thought to himself, *This stereotype can't be the only one. There must be more of him . . . Is it because he's a boss? A Republican?*

“And have you resolved your guilt after all these years?”

“Over?”

“The death of your father.”

“I don't . . .” Manny was confused. To his surprise and embarrassment, his hands began to shake ever so slightly. He couldn't answer.

“And your odd middle name, *Achan*—why did your parents name you after a Jewish criminal?”

“*What?*”



“Achan was a thief who angered God so much that he punished all the Israelites in retaliation. It’s right in the Old Testament. I know my Bible.”

Manny decided to rebel, just a bit. “My mother believes Achan was really a hero, sir.”

Hunsecker raised a hand and flattened his hair, front to back, reminding Manny of a 1950s greaser. “Oh? How is that?” he asked.

“She . . . uh, said that Achan confessed his theft to save the Israelites from God’s wrath, and for his efforts he and his entire family were stoned to death.”

“What of it?”

“She believes Achan was scapegoated for their problems, that God had nothing to do with it, and she thinks Joshua was really the bad guy, and that—”

“All right then . . . So you love *whistleblowers*, Mr. Eden?”

“Sir, I—”

“And you’ve come to Washington to *save them*? I’m afraid I’m skeptical. Do you have some sort of savior complex?”

Manny smiled, though inwardly he squirmed. Under the glare of Hunsecker, he imagined the Washingtonians of Cafe Artaud watching him and squirming also in a state of sympathy and irritation—hundreds of minute vibrations worming up Manny’s legs and into his face.

“Tell me, Mr. Eden, what are you trying to prove? What is your real goal?”

“To-to save America from herself?” Manny blurted out.

“What? Are you trying to be *flip*?”

All Hunsecker motion stopped. His scrutiny of Manny was frighteningly prognostic and bellowing without sound. Manny sat up straight in the chair, struggled for composure. Hunsecker looked like a cross between a dead bass and a pissed off gargoyle—a classic, bad boss face, another stereotypical reaction. Ed’s Plant Emporium beckoned. Manny reminded himself to just *tell the truth*.

“I’ve come to be part of the Reagan Revolution, and—”

“And you think I haven’t? Look, Mr. . . . *Garden-of-Eden*, humor has its place,” the Hunsecker said, leading the Manny fowl, squeezing the trigger, “but I think of this job interview as an obstacle you must hurdle.”

“Yes, I—”



“And furthermore, *dolores capitis non fero. Eos do.*”

“Sir?”

“That’s Latin. One of five languages I speak.”

“What does it mean?”

“It translates to *do not taint these moments with frivolity.*”

Hunsecker smiled really big, catching Manny off guard, sighed as if disgusted, and returned to his plate of mussel appetizer. He considered the interview with Manny Eden to be routine business, unpleasant and boring, yes, certainly not an occasion to suspect anything unusual; and though suspicious in the extreme, even Hunsecker could not predict the future catastrophe Manny Eden would cause, and one that would not only threaten Hunsecker’s own existence, but that of the Grand Republic Babylon as well.

* * *

BEFORE HE COULD THREATEN BABYLON, or anything else, Manny had learned to sustain himself on a cornball devotion to democracy and America. While studying in the poli-sci program at the University of Wisconsin he stupefied roommates and girlfriends alike with New Order predictions for a Pax Americana society going into the year 2000—complete with Martian colonies, gasless aqua-cars, low taxes, free health care, cities sans ghettos and security for all. Being a headstrong and pugnacious political personality in his hometown of Kenosha, he had worked hard to defeat the mayoral bully, “Mob Boss” Rosetti. He’d also blown the *Chicago Sun* whistle, loud as the evening freight, on the Drummond family who ran the local newspaper, the *Kenosha Morning Sentinel*. They supported the mayor’s various binges and catastrophes, and he believed the cretins to be genuine threats to democracy.

Even decades later in St. Elizabeth’s mental hospital while playing chess with Hinckley, Manny’s mind reached out to embrace Washington, drifted like a wind-blown memo through the idol airs and sacred pillars. He was an incurable idealist given to fantasy, and he created



within himself a martyr symphony of whistleblower souls who would one day rise phoenix-like from the power struggle ash to restore the city to democracy.

Though imprisoned at St. E's for pleading insanity after ridding Earth of the White House hyena who murdered the love of his life, Laney Dracos, Manny remained a loyal beast of burden to all. He couldn't help it. *The big lug!* It never left him, even during those occasional bouts of misanthropy provoked by hospital therapists—and why would they do such a thing? Because they didn't like the look of his face, and often as possible, unfairly used it as an excuse.

As for the rest of his body, Manny stood out lanky and dish-white wherever he went, a six-foot-one-inch high chiaroscuro without meaning: hair and eyes of darkest brown against that pale Wisconsin skin. If he walked naked into a bare, sunlit room, he morphed into a smear of shadow. His real physical handicap though was what Kenosha elders, cosmeticians and convenience store clerks termed, “a punch-it face.” Even Mommy K said he sported a “smirky mug,” the kind people liked to hit, and that's why Dr. Killany, chief therapist at St. E's, and Manny's biggest enemy, often imagined Manny to be dismissing him as a loathsome bureaucrat for deliberately falsifying Manny's condition in order to keep him a political prisoner of Washington.

Of course, this fact was true, and Killany abhorred that Manny judged him for it. Therefore, whenever he saw the chance, the doctor would smile really big and say to Manny with a gentle tone:

“Smirking like that *only* supports your diagnosis. Remember, you once murdered your own boss.”

Manny, fully expecting the jab, and with a low and dry voice, would usually respond with something like:

“My apologies, Doctor *Human Kind*. I was simply imagining you performing on stage at the Kennedy Center.”

“Oh, and what was I performing, Mr. Eden?”

“Swan Lake in a swastika tutu, while your White House buddies watched with opera glasses and clapped.”

“So I'm a Nazi homosexual?”

“No, doc, a Nazi transvestite with blue balls.”

And so it went.



No matter his face or therapist, if he failed to express remorse for his crime in St. E's, the staff termed him a "sociopath in denial." If he expressed remorse, the staff termed him a "sociopath with a manipulative agenda"—whatever it took to keep him locked away. St. E's was determined not to risk angering the White House or Congress. They all feared that upon release, Manny had the potential to go national, perhaps talk radio, or worse, *Sixty Minutes*.

* * *

MANNY NOW PACES WITHOUT LEGS and fumes. This interview with Hunsecker has devolved into cliché, the stuff of bad movies, so bad that no one would ever believe him.

Does The Gipper know about shitheads like this?

In the meantime, what can he do about it? Nothing. The fellow is obviously a grave-digging dictator. From the very first handshake, Hunsecker had squeezed his fingers (and if it's one thing Manny *hates* it's guys who squeeze fingers during a handshake). At any moment, Manny thinks he'll lose it. One or two more growls from this stereotype and his mind will imagine all sorts of dangerous fauna floating out of nothing and performing strange tricks, some of it even seeking victims—a coping habit learned since age six when he magically poofed into being the Marvel comic superhero DOCTOR STRANGE to scald out from beneath his bed a pack of foot-eating trolls.

But such displays of phantasmic violence might not be necessary.

"Enjoying your Monte Cristo and rob roy?" Hunsecker asks.

Manny can't answer. A knot of cheese and whiskey flatus has just lodged like putty in his throat. As he stares at the boss person, holding back his own eruption, he unexpectedly feels a reluctant pity, and wonders why he hadn't felt it earlier. After all, Hunsecker poses before him as a simulacra of a Hollywood Al Pacino—one broken and hastily restored on a face more obnoxious than noble, more pitiful than tragic.

"The food, Mr. Eden? The rob roy?"



Manny forces speech through the flatus knot. “Fine. This place makes the best roys, Mr. Hunsecker.” Hunsecker grins. Manny decides it’s time to lighten things up further and use his JFK voice. “*Ask not what your country can cook for you, ask rather why you should not fricassee your country.*”

Imitating JFK had always been a party favorite in Kenosha. But not here.

Manny watches the growing scowl on Hunsecker’s face. He realizes what a huge mistake he’s just made. So what’s the big deal? JFK is still a popular president, and besides, Manny had been clevering out funny imitations ever since he was a kid. Between black eyes (so many that his friends nicknamed him Achin’ Eden), his old Wisconsin prairie pals, Tommy Cox and Steve Field, nagged him to be a stand-up comic like their parents watched on late night television, and so, by the age of fourteen, much to their glee, he was able to produce fair imitations of both popular and relatively obscure personalities, including Jimmy Stewart, JFK, Stevie Wonder, Groucho Marx, Wo Fat from *Hawaii Five-O*, Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols, Lily doing “I’m Tired” from *Blazing Saddles*, as well as cartoon characters like the Tasmanian Devil, Rocket J. Squirrel, and Daffy Duck’s most famous “despicable.”

Friends and enemies alike were either impressed or infuriated by his antics—the difference, of course, being Achin’ Eden’s timing and application.

Now, even though he’s beaming at Hunsecker like a comic-relief Disney dwarf, the man’s bellicosity sucks in with a heave and blazes forth, narrowing and focusing long enough to scorch out a hole in Manny’s future.

The Martian death ray pivots.

“Mr. Hunsecker, the *uhhhhh*—”

“The *what?*”

“Nothing . . . nothing.”

Things are out of control. Hunsecker’s jaw line and chin, as symptoms, whiten hard, flush bone to air with the tremendous effort of chewing his final mussel before the entree arrives. It’s suddenly all or nada for Manny Eden. Even though the concept of pushing his nose to within even an inch of Hunsecker’s ass is abhorrent, he **MUST** make it clear.



“I want this job, Mr. Hunsecker,” Manny says, demanding and weary, pricked by the cactus of Ed’s. “I’ve been sleeping on it for weeks, dreaming it, living it. I mean, it’s a good thing, and not just like working in a corporate Skinner box, if you know what I’m saying? I want to do *my part* to help President Reagan clean up government. Isn’t that worth it? Won’t we as Americans benefit from that?”

Hunsecker appears dumbfounded.

“*Nulla mensa sine impensa.*”

“Sir?”

“Translated roughly, it means, *I don’t get it . . .* And by the way, Mr. Garden-of-Eden, how did you learn of my office?”

“I read an article in *Newsweek* explaining how the Office of Whistleblower Counsel helped a whistleblower regain his job at the Justice Department. It was amazing. He’d reported certain district attorneys taking bribes from drug cartel bosses and his own boss—”

“Telling the truth is risky business in this city, my friend. You might get your head shot off.”

Manny lifts his glass to drink, imagining a nearby explosion of head. He can’t believe human beings in positions of trust really act so badly. Does it matter if they’re Republicans or Democrats? Would he ever know the truth?

“The real problem is finding a memorable whistleblower to begin with,” Hunsecker says.

At the edge of Manny’s eye, Hunsecker’s body subsides further. Manny may *still* have a chance. He **MUST** impress the stereotype *now*. “I know something of bureaucracies throughout history, sir. Once I knew I wanted to work in Washington, I studied—”

“Bureaucrats have been around since before Babylon, Mr. Eden,” Hunsecker says dismissively. “We adjust the law when Congress turns its back. As a matter of fact, and most people don’t know it, but the regulations we write have the *power of law*. Did you know that?”

“That’s astonishing, sir. I had no idea.”

“It’s a good thing because Congress won’t stop creating monsters they are unwilling to leash . . . Why if we didn’t act, even my office would have become one.” He sighs, deflates again, removes a roll from



the bread basket at the center of the table and begins to butter it—a very good sign.

Perhaps Manny can relax?

While Hunsecker chews, the man-boy from Kenosha imagines CONGRESS and its lumbering Frankensteins of pork and compromise, impotent bullets fired into sluggish Executive waters, blind and stupid energies unleashed and forgotten like decaying nukeheads beneath Nevada. *Shine, Perishing Democracy!* Only now, the Office of Whistleblower Counsel exists, a “heartfelt brainchild” (according to *Newsweek*) that reflects by its charge the “American tradition for democracy, integrity and fair play.” Congress drafted the magical incantations necessary to raise the Excalibur of Hunsecker’s office from the lake floor of vague but good intention, and the implications for the redemption of America were rippling in effect, beginning with those very few women and men possessed of sufficient courage and moral conscience. Hunsecker’s office tuned in to their frequency, injected an army, amplified their howl till it inevitably burst the friable walls of corruption. No bureaucrats or cabinet heads, no White House appointees or senators or Pentagon generalissimos were immune.

And Manny knows The Gipper wouldn’t have it any other way. Neither would he.

Politics and do-gooding were turkey and pecan pie to a guy like Manny Eden, and once the Jimmy Carter years of the American presidency passed, he settled into his philosophical niche—and not surprisingly, this “niche” hadn’t won him any friends among the powers-that-be in Kenosha, namely, City Hall, and the town newspaper (the conservative *Kenosha Morning Sentinel*) owned by a man named Drummond who appointed his nineteen year old son, Syd Drummond (an obese and alien-looking bully known to Manny since grade school), to the position of senior political editor.

Like his father, and the rest of City Hall, Syd termed Manny an “unholy cross between Ralph Nader and Barry Goldwater,” for as the young Eden grew and his rare-vision politics matured, he pushed both his *democratic* for-the-people and *conservative* less-government views with the uncompromising zeal of a televangelist.



Syd never could figure what made the kid tick. He knew little of Manny's family and background, and out of ignorance, nicknamed him "The Golden Nadir," changing the "e" to "i" because that got him laughs around the coffee pot. Besides, anything that diminished Manny made the Drummonds happy. Indeed, they had every reason to loathe him. The kid's "bicycle sermons" (Manny often barked at Syd from atop his old banana-seat stingray) beginning at age fifteen were the stuff of barroom jokes. He would needle the Drummonds for the *Sentinel* being too soft on corrupt city politicians. In the face of Syd's sausage-sized middle finger, The Golden Nadir would rant on and on about the *Sentinel* dumbing down the good citizens of Kenosha, turning them into "goldfish awaiting death by BB gun"—the final battle between the two of them taking place at the City Hall spring picnic at Paycock Park on Lake Michigan in 1983.

* * *

BACK AT CAFÉ ARTAUD, A DAZED-BY-THE-SEAT-OF-POWER Ms. Idaho appears. She is the waitress. She plucks away Hunsecker's plate and replaces it in one smooth motion with a small football of game hen. She then hollows him out with a river of blonde hair, two ponds of green eye, a sun of forehead (all the wait staff in Cafe Artaud are blondes), inquires if he is a congressman—having learned this much self-promotion tact as she fiddles with the plates.

Hunsecker looks up at her, grins like a snarling whale. Ms. Idaho bubbles out something about "fresh baked" and evaporates into a nearby palm. Hunsecker begins to munch his bird. Foreheads of golden wait staff smear the air. Manny glances around Cafe Artaud at the shutter-diced blocks of sunlight and the many faux-plants-in-glass decorating the salmon yellow walls.

Manny grows nervous.

He thinks of something to say, fearful of prolonged silence.



“Has OWC rescued any memorable whistleblowers lately?” His tone is subdued, anxious as he is to avoid a new dilemma. But surprise, the stereotype smiles, and in a way that appears genuine.

“*The Office of Whistleblower Counsel is a child of men no less wise than the Founding Fathers. She is a woman, pure and strong and beautiful, like America,*” he says, magniloquent as a Washington socialite high on status. “We are forever searching for memorable whistleblowers, Mr. Eden. And as soon as we find one, we’ll all celebrate.”

Manny glosses over. He has a vision of OWC as an American goddess, her sword protecting the brave and swinging in circles like sunlight above her head, the power of its force and purity holding the yipping Morlocks at bay. As Manny looks on, Hunsecker carefully wipes his mouth clean of hen sauce. He refolds and places his napkin on the table in a genteel *L’Ecole Des Jeunes* fashion—as if he’d attended that finishing school for wealthy women—while his face, uncompromised by trivial task, waxes pensive with visions of anguished and sorely outnumbered patriots. Within moments, Hunsecker is idol-jawed with solemnity, poised in eternal requiem before the Tomb of the Unknown Whistleblower.

“The duty of my office, Mr. Eden, is to defend responsible persons from reprisals against those who would destroy them for speaking out. It is vital that witnesses of courage and a sense of public duty be free to speak, for good government cannot be conducted on the basis of lies.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Conscientiousness must be valued, or we become nothing but a culture of yes-men, um . . . yes-persons.”

Curtain call.

Once his meal is picked clean to bone and puddle, Hunsecker clears his throat, and portraying a block-hauling self-discipline, inhales a few cubic tons of Café Artaud air before crunching down. “Mr. Eden, there are things you *must learn* about our management culture,” he announces, “on the slim chance you might be chosen for this job from among the many candidates available.”

Now the real test. How enthralled can Manny look?

“Though I am the supervisor of the Whistleblower Counsel Investigation Division to which you’ve applied, I think of myself as a true leader, not simply a manager.” He hesitates, takes a quick glance at



Manny to make certain he's fixated. "Leaders such as myself thoroughly understand the beneficial use of *power*, as well as *aggression*. This should tell you something." Manny's gas knot steams loose through his nose.

"I've done a thorough self-inventory, Mr. Eden, turned inward so deep, towards my own personal philosophy."

"Yes, sir."

"Essence, hardtack, the gristle of tough decision, this is *my* religion. Are you listening?"

"Yes, I am."

Manny's attention shifts as Ms. Idaho returns. The Hunsecker clears his throat again, irritated at Manny's momentary lack of attention. Regardless, he orders a cherry cheese cake from Ms. Idaho. She nods and leaves.

"Now, tell me, Mr. Eden . . . pop quiz. What have you learned about my management culture?"

"Huh?"

"What did I just tell you? Weren't you listening?"

"Yes, of course. Your personal philosophy, or, the culture . . . I don't—"

"Can't you be honest?"

"It's not that."

"Then you can't be *decisive*."

"Not that either—"

"I think it is. You're coming off as rather boneless."

Manny's expression is extragalactic and Hunsecker notices. He would now call a quick end to this job interview if not for the fact that his cherry cheesecake is missing.

Harrumph!

The boss plucks a sugar packet from a bowl, and after opening the contents into his iced tea, begins to stir.

"I'm waiting for an answer, Mr. Eden."

Manny sees the dead man's curve ahead, his voice a lonely whine in the rigging, "I've learned . . . that essence and hardtack, uh, that your management culture is powerful, like a religion in the sense that it, uh, promises hell if a thing, I mean, if the whole group teams up to, uh . . ."

Hunsecker goes from red to purple. His shirt collar, like a garrote, pinches his head to a mutated beet. With one hand he reaches up and



runs a finger between his collar and skin in an attempt to relieve the sensation of choking. He thought he'd cornered Manny's attention, victory at hand, but somehow the fellow had wiggled loose.

Damn him!

Honor is at stake and a test must be given, immediately. Either Eden will ball a fist and bake Hunsecker's face to coffee-table size, or he will submit, sputter down to softness—and of course, Hunsecker knows how badly the small townner needs the job, so he's betting his teeth on the second reaction.

Unfortunately, he doesn't yet realize that despite Manny's idealism, or perhaps because of it, the small townner has a real problem with authority. Especially, *boss types*. Even the word "boss" makes Manny feel wormy.

Only a year before his journey to Washington Manny was fired from a job for which he'd shown great promise (manager trainee at the Furniture Heaven in Milwaukee) not only because he decked a psychotically irate store manager who had slapped his co-worker, Sherry Dobbins, in the parking lot, but also because he taunted the boss afterwards (according to the *Kenosha Morning Sentinel*) by terming him "a low life weenie bastard."

Then came other firings.

Manny was terminated from a Kelly Boy temp job at Kenosha City Hall for exchanging words with his boss, Mr. Kyle Stickle, the Director of Public Safety, over the fact that the Kenosha Police Department was overstaffed with "blackjack-dumb Barney Fifes" who had nothing better to do than "speedtrap honest citizens to justify their salaries." An outraged Mayor Rossetti only found out afterwards that Manny actually worked there.

Following that, he was fired from an apprentice bartender job at O'Shaughnessy's Lounge for refusing a direct order from O'Shaughnessy himself to charge "all black-hearted fucking immigrants" (bicycle assembly plant workers from Cuba and El Salvador) almost double for rail drinks.

Then things got worse.



* * *

AFTER HIS FIRING FROM O'SHAUGHNESSY'S, Manny returned home to find his mother weeping—not due to his untimely yet predictable termination, but all because of a distressing news story about The Gipper on CBS news.

Mommy K sprawled herself on the living room couch, her long dark hair undone and falling on one side to the carpet, her face pushed down in a pillow as she repeated to herself in a tone of unflinching despair:

"My poor country. Oh, God, my poor country!"

Alarmed, Manny asked her what had happened and she sat up in his arms. As he gently stroked her hair, she said between sobs, "It's that Reagan creature, Manny . . . He's wrecking our nation . . . bankrupting us and selling us out . . . to special interest pirates."

Unknown to Manny, this was Mommy K's last ditch effort to reclaim him from the wiles of The Gipper. She'd been a liberal activist in Wisconsin for many years, even worked on presidential and congressional campaigns in the early sixties, but her ploy was doomed to failure. Manny was still fifty percent Hollywood, still lying on a couch at nine years old watching the chimps and footballs of the actor Ronald Reagan. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He said to his mother, "It ain't the president, Mommy-K, just some political frogs who work for him. He'll pith the bastards, you'll see."

Rather than be calmed by her son, his utter denial caused Mommy K to lurch to her feet and screech at Manny:

"HOW DARE YOU SUGGEST THAT ASSHOLE, SIX-SHOOTING, CORPORATE PITCH-MAN IS NOT RESPONSIBLE!"

"Mommy-K—"

"Manny, you've been living in la-la land for *too long*. You've got to flush the Jeffersonian dream shit you learned in college. And no more superheroes or American sword goddesses. These are the products of fantasy. Our heroes are dead . . . They've all been killed by 'The Combine!'"

"The Combine?"





“Read Kesey. It’s all there.”

Manny stood to face his mother, trying to stay calm, though looking concerned. He held her, but she shrugged him off and glared at him. Manny used his JFK voice (because he fancied himself a comedian of sorts) in an attempt to soften Mommy-K: “*Whoa, Mommy-K, the Gipper is like old JFK, he’ll—*”

“What?” His mother verged on ballistic. “You can’t compare a Republican like Reagan to John Kennedy. That’s blasphemy! *Blasphemy!* Can you be more hellishly ignorant? You’re a Democrat, Manny!”

“But—”

“Your naivety makes me sick. You’ve learned nothing from me.”

Manny sputtered. “Why don’t you grow up, mom? We have to live in *the now*, don’t we?”

Manny’s final mistake. Mommy K became so irate and impossible that her son went into hiding. No dinner for days afterwards. She barely spoke to him for weeks. Meanwhile, Manny was forced to hunt for another job, only the task proved even more difficult. Word was spreading like rancid butter all over Kenosha that the hothead crusader, Manny Eden, was not employee material.

Some even believed he was Irish, despite the fact his mother was Jewish.

* * *

HUNSECKER BEGINS WITH A BLOAT. After that, change occurs rapidly. Swelling to a self-righteous enormity, the ominous dislodging continues until the hemisphere of his shadow falls across Manny’s hand and chills his fingers. For further effect, the boss swivels his head like the Great Toad God of Mambia, as if searching for Ms. Idaho, and booms forth at Manny with:

“NO CHEESECAKE!”

Manny Eden gulps a big shot of Rob Roy. Hunsecker’s left eyelid twitches. “Find out about my cheesecake, Eden. *Now!*”

Manny can’t help ask himself: *Okay, so what? Will any of this bullshit matter if I get the job?* Regardless, he feels the old dreamy hate return in



the light of Hunsecker's glare. Instinctively, Manny wants to scream, spit, gag, hurl scalding hot soup at Hunsecker, burn him from life with the power of DOCTOR STRANGE, the superhero wizard, but before any retribution can begin, the front door opens several feet away and washes him in sidewalk light. Ms. Idaho drops a glass on the floor, breaking it.

The sound expands like a tiny shriek.

A pause then. A nervous laugh.

In a simple and calm way, Manny replies: "I'll do it."

Hunsecker observes an on-the-brink Manny Eden glancing anxiously around for a member of the wait staff—the reality of his affliction propping the Hunsecker delusion.

The internal *schadenfreude* is obvious.

Once more, the boss face grows calm as a hurricane-eye. He intends to approach as a shrewd dick, recover his potency, reevaluate Eden's aptitude for loyalty (and that was important above all things, for the Office of Whistleblower Counsel needed protection from leaks and liberals). But even now, his plans are in doubt, for Cafe Artaud waxes vague and finicky, intolerant of all human presence. No one suspects that Manny Eden's imagination possesses the power to denature and transmogrify the quivering atoms of the Georgetown eatery.

Before the boss can utter another word, Manny lashes out. He starts with a simple frying pan. He imagines it hurtling out of the kitchen. It skims Hunsecker's head and whirls across the dining room like a loose helicopter blade to knock one of the Washingtonians unconscious, ricocheting off his forehead with a loud *kub-whang* and skidding to rest in a plate of Caesar salad. At the same time, the faux-plants in glass begin to squirm and seep loose into the walls. Some of them imbed snugly in the gypsum and crisp to fossils. Others slide like melting plates of wax to the floor, congealing there to fly-trap mouths that squeak like tortured mice and scurry around in search of toe prey.

The entire dining room begins to scream.

Manny cannot locate Ms. Idaho. He figures she must be with the kitchen help, all of them huddled quivering behind the steel fryer, watching as the soup du jour thickens and rises ominously from the cook pot like a red fist looking for Hunsecker jaw. Before it can punch through to the dining room though, Manny rises up from his chair. Hunsecker



raises his hands to protect his face. His jaw drops to the floor, pulled like gum, for Manny's true nature now gleams forth from beneath a facade of mundane flesh. He has become DOCTOR STRANGE, his entire head a roaring sun devoid of spots. While his tormentor howls and evaporates like water on a hot sidewalk, Manny proclaims:

“YES, OH WRETCHED ONE, I AM YOUR SUPERIOR!”

Unfortunately though, the real Hunsecker is still solid.

Hunsecker's eyes reveal to him the lachrymose face of Manny Eden blooming whiter, and groping: a face of dark brow and eye cast against a skin as pale as the tablecloth. The throat beneath swallows hard.

“Mr. Eden.” Hunsecker struggles to portray sincere incredulity. “You seem to be a man less concerned with ambition, and more concerned with accomplishment?”

“Well, I . . . yes.”

“Accomplishment for the sake of itself?”

“For the sake of an end, sir.”

“Part of the Mother Theresa *help-whistleblowers-thing*?”

“Uh . . . maybe. Look—”

“Then if I ordered you, as your boss, to cease and desist all aid to a whistleblower, any whistleblower, what would you do?”

Manny watches Hunsecker's eyes. They flash like bulbs before thinning to crescents of neon moon. A door has opened within the subterranean pallor. A party of shadows drifts into the obscurity of Cafe Artaud.

Manny replies, “I would naturally defer to you, since you would never order such a thing if . . . it were not in the best interest of the government and, uh, the nation.”

“Good answer, Mr. Eden. I believe you might be a true patriot.”

Hunsecker smiles and clears his throat, taking full measure of the other's trembling hands resting flat on the table top. He sees in that quiver an eager motivation for success, as well as a potential for absolute pliancy. At first, Manny Eden squirmed in him as just another ball of barking nerves, only now, he resolves, slots in well at the Procrustean factory. At such time Hunsecker saw fit to fill the air with the implausible in the presence of the doubtful, Eden would bloom the true poseur, exorcise the demons of negativism whatever the source.



Manny, sensing the shift, once again attempts to engage Hunsecker in a way he believes the stereotype will accept without complaint. “At the office, sir, how do you find a memorable whistleblower? How do you tell good from bad?”

“It’s a sense of *evil*. You develop a nose for it after a few years.”

“But do real whistleblowers suffer retaliation?” Manny asks.

“Yes, Mr. Eden, and the sad thing is, most of the time, we cannot prove it, but at OWC we do as little bad as possible, and as much good as we can—that is, with the resources available.”

“I only hope I can serve as one of those . . . sir.”

“We receive complaints,” Hunsecker says, “deep throat stuff of all kinds, and plenty of suffering, usually through the mail. The letters claim abuse, persecutions, criminal activities and such, but even ones which appear to have substance usually prove trivial or false upon close analysis. A lot of crazies, paranoids and malcontents out there.”

“I bet.”

“Some of the letters are hysterically funny at first, then just when you think you’ve seen everything, here comes a wallapolooser to bowl you over.”

“No doubt.”

“You see, Mr. Eden, our government is not nearly one percent as corrupt as the media portrays us.”

“Corruption sells Chevys, Mr. Hunsecker.”

“A few years ago, oh—and this one is a gem—a few years ago a Democrat editor of a small town newspaper in Illinois wrote OWC to claim the CIA had implanted a telepathic listening device in his brain, so that whenever he thought something foul about President Reagan, an electric shock would be triggered that jolted him so hard his dentures fell out. He even included receipts from his dentist.”

“Unbelievable!”

“Here, let me give you an example of a truly *memorable* whistleblower. I carry this one with me for laughs. It was sent to us last month by an EPA emissions inspector in the Midwest—a real psycho.”

The grinning Hunsecker reaches inside his jacket, pulls out a coffee-stained square of paper and hands it to Manny. He unfolds it and reads:





Dear Whistleblower Justice League,

Do you know pimp city EPA? Can you name the whores? Do they look surprised when you show? Why did they refuse to pass that mustard? Why did they spit on our wives in Rawlin's All-You-Can-Eat-For-Whores Buffet? Do you have a feel for these atomic levels of whoring? Are you appointed by a precedent of the United States? Will turds rise to the top here just like in a dictatorship? Will the EPA boss we want to murder, Mr. Russo, deny he's a homicidal sludge-for-blood toxic waste whore, the guy from Epanoma? And what about Jan Darcy, the state biologist? Do you know why he blew about the hundreds on slabs? Or why the state whores ran him out on a slander then smoothed everything over with a thick cream of tumor? Do you know what affected us when Russo, acting like a cumsucking jackass from dickville, said then if it's so bad why doesn't Washington do something about the goddamned problem? Is it none of our business then?

Sincerely,

The Mudslinger Mob From Marengo County

Manny hands the letter back to Hunsecker who refolds it and slides it inside his jacket.

"Well, Mr. Eden, what do you think?" This was the final test. "Is that one *memorable* enough for you?"

Manny answers, "Real strange. Borderline schizo, sir."

"So true. You have no idea how nearly impossible it is to choose a letter not written by an eccentric malcontent or a mental patient." Hunsecker then sighs loud and deep, as if longing for days more Nixon-like and halcyon, and says, "I believe you are a *true* patriot, Mr. Eden."

He winks, and reaching across the table, places his hand atop Manny's, and leaves it there.

The Golden Nadir can only smile, and wonder whether or not Hunsecker will demand sex at some point in the future.