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ThePicayune.com

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of
Jeffery Edwin Johannes

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program
Dedicated to my wife to be, Tracy Lea, a source of motivation, especially when it counts (and it counts a lot).
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As if creative writing itself isn’t enough of an immodest gesture, it’s time I thank the people that made this thesis possible. I just wish I had a little metal man to wave in the air. This stack of paper is a little too subject to the wind for my liking.

Thank you, Tracy, my fiancé, and dedicatee of this thesis for your patience and support during all my agony and strife.

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And thank you, Iowa State University, both the English Department and the Graduate College in general, for giving me this opportunity in the first place.
TV star John Constantine was predestined a powerhouse for his primetime presence alone. Will his on-air death carry the same immortality?...

**Celebrity Death Mourned, Commemorated**

Jack B. Knimbel took the spot light on the rock stage, conquered all contenders the wrestling ring, and put his pen mark on the writing world. He also went where no man had gone back to before...

**Rocker, Wrestler, Writer, Jack B. Knimbel, Returns to Womb**

Also: An update on the word-torn Cleaver family – a reenactment of the events that seared their suburban sublimity...

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Plus: Fiction by Trent Sands...

**Man Bites Dog**
Dear Readers:

Thank you for coming. If you are a regular visitor, by now you know the integrity with which I attack my leads. Just my articles (nearly a hundred of them) on the lives and languor of the Olson Twins, especially "Twins, Mary Kate and Ashley Olson, Really One Person," show the commitment and thoroughness of my journalism.

If you are new here, don't let the titillation of my topics, celebrity sensationalism, corporate cover-ups, avarice advise, glass ceiling scandal, dissuade you. You will find my coverage deep and cutting edge.

I want to dissolve the conundrum between "hard news" and "entertainment." I'll quote the men and women of news media themselves. "All the news that's fit to print," goes an old adage, but sensation has been as continuously printed as The New York Times. As well, a reliable source once said, "DOG BITES MAN"?—That's not a story. "MAN BITES DOG"?—Now that's a story! The nightly news. Journalism. The Press. The Media. It's all sensationalism; they all look for the rare lead.

All the codes of journalistic ethics banter on about publishing news of public record, voter interest, and local importance. But yellow journalism has been around as long as the newspaper moguls themselves. They put Martians in the solar system, sunk the Lusitania, hunted down the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby, stalked Mark David Chapman, delivered the bouncing baby, now..."
baby Batboy, and lit the cigar that burned former president William Jefferson Clinton in his bed.

"DOG BITES MAN" is informative. The public should receive council on which breeds are most dangerous, and on how one should approach a stray. They should be forewarned of canines rampaging the streets of New York City. Indeed, it's the common stuff of local and national news. But common sense is commonplace, and the public wants to know what doesn't and shouldn't happen at a backyard barbecue, in apartment high rises, and on busy city thoroughfares.

Conversely, "Man Bites Dog" doesn't inform us a wit about how to vote or cook our meat. So what could make us journalists collect teeth, fur and torn clothing over all the lists, reasonings, tables, and advice of factual truth and practical virtue? So what makes us choose between seriousness and sensationalism? I hope my articles themselves answer these questions.

As I've insinuated, this is a tabloid and no more or less than the articles of The New Yorker or the stuff you watch at 5, 6, and 10. But as editor and writer, I hope to make it one of a kind, a groundbreaker. The stories in this issue, of celebrity, oddity, family dysfunction, and other perversity, aren't just sensation. They are stories of real people and the impulses we beat our hearts by. Just remember to consider these pages with the benefit of verisimilitude you give anything you read. Enjoy. This rag won't be a mere tab-

JFK International Airport, is a dog, a Bichon Frise by breed. His happy, round face, white but for its startling black nose and dark eyes, is framed by large, fluffy, triangular ears combed out in even, tight waves. In many ways, he resembles a poodle, except that he is stouter and his muzzle is considerably shorter. A bespectacled boy at Mr. Peabody's side holds the Bichon's right front paw and touches a file to his black nails.

"Look it here, Sherman," Mr. Peabody says to the boy. "This is quite the perplexing turn of e-
"Please unclench your jaw. Why on earth do you bite me?"

Mr. Peabody is astute and always asks the right questions at the right time. He also knows, though, that whatever the man's motivation, Mr. Peabody is, mostly, the wrong dog at the wrong time. The Bichon forgets his question for the moment as the man disengages from the dog's furry leg and climbs to his feet.

"That'll be enough, Sherman," Mr. Peabody says. Sherman stops filing, and Mr. Peabody delicately rubs the reddened mark inside his haunch with his front paw. "This is quite intriguing." Mr. Peabody hops off the chair of the shoeshine station and lands on the opened flap of the journal's pocket:

**A TALKING DOG?**

DOGS, OF course, have talked in stories since there were tales to tell. If Odysseus' dog, Argus, dies humbly at the sight of his beloved master, isn't it as fathomable that the bound was sentient? And before Argus, Aesop's dogs talk. Then, in George Orwell's parable, Animal Farm, livestock have the gift of writing. They are even in Art Spiegelman's brilliant comic books, American---The Talking Dog! But now an actual speaking Spot may not be the mere fluff of fiction.

"With all the scientific advances our lab has made," says Dr. Carla Cartwright, head of DNA research at Peckskill State Experimental Lab and Women's Clinic, "who knows what manifestations of genetic mutation and manipulation could produce a dog that talks."
his four feet.

A little sneer in his mustached lip, the man stares down stupidly at the Bichon. "How—?"

"Quite right," Mr. Peabody snaps back. "You wonder how a dog can talk."

"Well... yes."

"I can't really explain it myself. I'm an historian by profession, not a geneticist or evolutionary biologist. Shall we walk?" Mr. Peabody gestures with this paw down the terminal hallway, toward the guarded entrance gates.

The man absently strokes one of the scars on his cheek. "Sure. I guess," he says and cannot help but smile a little.

"Sherman? Wait here. We won't be too long."

The man and the dog leave the boy, walk down the terminal, and exit the gates harmlessly.

"Quite intriguing indeed. And quite perplexing too," Mr. Peabody says. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't yet."

"Yes. Well, my name is Mr. Peabody, and as you might have surmised, back there is my boy Sherman."
"Oh. . . um, I'm, heh, Mr. Burnett. Douglass Burnett. How do you do?"

"Oh, I feel just fine. Though, I'll feel even better once my pedicure's finished... Very perplexing indeed. . . Why do you happen to be at the airport today?"

"I work here," Mr. Burnett says. "For the U.S. Postal Service."

"Yes. Yes, of course! And, if I may ask, that is, if you feel comfortable answering, why did you bite me back there?"

"Umm. . . I, I didn't think about it

GREEK MYTH: THE STUFF OF TABLOIDS?

WE OFTEN think of tabloid journalism as a recent development. Journalism historians will tell you the rag sheet developed in the late 19th Century with the rise in reading levels amongst the working class, which hastened the increase in the number of newspapers published in America and Europe.

According to these experts, 19th century laborers had otherwise uneducated interests, so to compete among the hordes of bricklayers, ditch diggers, and dock workers, editors and journalists resorted to scandal, conspiracy, and oddity.

The word "tabloid," referring to its concentrated size, about half that of traditional news-
immediately just then. I sort of just re-acted."

"Hmm. . . hmm. . . Well, well. . . If it's not an imposition, Mr. Burnett, if I gave you a moment, could you hazard a guess as to why you bit me?"

"Well. . ." The man pauses, and the pair walk by airport bars and luggage retailers. In a little plaza that acts as a hub to a few terminals filled with open-front restaurants, convenience stands, bookstores, and information booths, the man and the Bichon stop.

"I guess," says Mr. paper "broadsheet," found its modern meaning around 1900.

But tell all this to Dr. Fred Zumabar, head archaeologist for the American World Archaeological Society. Digging in Grecian ruins, he found ancient slabs and scrolls that possibly prove yellow journalism came well before the birth of Christ.

These slabs and scrolls tell of Greek government officials bemusing the common people's love of mythic tales and poetry, designed for little more than to sexually excite the morally depraved crowds.

"I imagine," says Dr. Zumabar, "that Greek myth tales and epics were the tabloids of Athens."

If this is true, one can imagine the Greek bard Homer, his toga
Burnett, “I just felt it was some sort of injustice: that a dog should be taking up a whole shoeshine station and be waited on by a young boy. That a... mutt. . . would be treated with such dignity when people go about hurting and maiming each other.”

“Hemm, well, I'm not a mutt.”

“What?”

“I'm not a mutt. I'm a purebred, certified Bichon Frise. Mr. Petre Peabody, Prince of Paddlepaw. Quite all right, though. Your reasoning is intriguing enough. There's something of Billy Pilgrim and Dresden in it, isn't there. Hmm... and stained with grease from a charred leg of lamb, his scabbed eyes wrapped up with torn linen, unroll a scroll (for effect) and bark out headlines: “ZEUS, AS SWAN. NESTS PROVINCIAL GRECIAN WOMAN. When asked, Hera again declined comment.” “TROJAN WAR VETERAN KILLS NEPTUNE'S FAVORITE CATTLE. God of oceans condemns vandal to several years 'lost at sea.' Deal for epic poem rights in the works.” “JASON THE ARGONAUT DITCHES DEVOTED DIVA. MEDEA. Screaming spouse sues for golden fleece, custody of kids.”
you probably thought Sherman was my owner, doting on me obliviously like that?"

"Em, well," and the man peers down incredulously at his thought, as if searching his blue U.S. postal shirt for a crumb. "He doesn't serve you, does he?"

"Oh," says Mr. Peabody, "In a manner of speaking. He's a kind of apprentice, I guess you'd say."

"An apprentice?"

"Yes. I tutor him on history, philosophy, and such. And he does the things for me I can't do for myself. You know, lacking thumbs and all."

"Oh. .." The man pauses again, looks up and right. "Mmmmm, I guess I should expect such a thing, you being a talking dog. You each get something out of it. Tit for Tat.

"Why, yes. You've got it! Shall we continue our walk?"

Mr. Peabody turns around and walks down the same arm of the airport from which they came. The two pass through the terminal gates, the man flashing his badge of employment and the dog shuffling under travelers' feet.

Inside the terminal, Mr. Peabody stops and looks up at the man. "You have peeked my curiosity quite famously, Mr. Burnett," Mr. Peabody says. "And I think I have learned a lit-
"You have amazed me quite a bit, too, Mr. Peabody," says Mr. Burnett, delighted.

"Yes. . . And I'd like to reward you."

"Reward me? How?"

"I have," says Mr. Peabody in whispers, speaking from the side of his mouth as best as a dog can, "a time machine."

"A time machine?"

"You don't believe me?"

The man frowns and furrows his eyebrows. "I suppose," he says, "if a talking dog has a time machine, I shouldn't be too surprised." Mr. Burnett smiles. "How do you intend to reward me?"

"Good. Good," Mr. Peabody says. "You pick a time, any time at all, that meets your purposes, and I'll take you there. Walk with me to the time machine and consider when in time you'd like to go."

They walk and shortly reach a door opposite the shoeshine station where Sherman waits expectantly.

"Have you made your decision?" Mr. Peabody asks.

"Actually, yes," Mr. Burnett says. "I'd like to go. . . back to before I was seven." He lifts his hand to his face. "Back to before... I got these scars. Maybe I can stop it
from happening."

"Hmm... intriguing. Very well then. Will you open the door?" says Mr. Peabody, offering his paw as explanation of his request.

"Of course." The man pulls the handle. The door opens and man and dog enter the dark room behind it.

The door closes. The man stares dimly before him, his eyes adjusting to the dark.

"This, this is just a broom closet," Mr. Burnett says.

"Hardly," replies Mr. Peabody, sitting and pawing the wound on his thigh. "It's a Custodial Equipment Depository. They don't use brooms here anymore." With that, Mr. Peabody frolics and weaves between the man's legs. Unstable, Mr. Burnett stumbles onto the Bichon's paw and falls backward into a desk chair.

"G'Youch!" yelps Mr. Peabody. "That is quite enough." Mr. Peabody pounces onto the man's lap, jumps toward the man's face, and in a growling rage, his white teeth suddenly impossibly large, he bites into his throat. The Bichon jounces to
the floor and turns toward the man.

"Ech... You," Mr. Burnett gulps, inhales jaggedly, "bit me..." The man holds his neck and blood seeps through his fingers.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Burnett," Mr. Peabody says. "I don't quite know what came over me. Open the door and I'll get help."

Mr. Burnett, still holding his neck with a hand, staggers the rolling desk chair to the door and opens it.

"Don't worry," Mr. Peabody says. "I'll be back soon," and he slips out the door.

Once outside the broom closet, Mr. Peabody trots across the terminal hallway and jumps onto the chair of the shoeshine station, where Sherman waits stoically.

"When is our next destination, Mr. Peabody?" Sherman asks.

"I'm not sure," replies Mr. Peabody. "I think we've just gone everywhere I can think of." Mr. Peabody raises his paw. "Finish my cuticles, Sherman. I need time to ponder."

MORAL: A dog, no matter his eloquence, is still a cur.

OR: Never bite the beast who bites back.
**JFK: MAN FOUND MURDERED IN MYSTERIOUS MAULING**

New York, NY—Business grounds to a halt while flights are grounded at JFK International Airport tonight as authorities investigate a grotesque death.

Earlier this evening, a custodian discovered the body of Douglass Burnett, 38, in a broom closet in one of the many terminals at the New York City airport.

“I had to stop at my desk, which is kept in one of the Custodial Equipment Depositories,” said Leonard Willis, the custodian who found the body, “for a log sheet so I could record the vacuuming I did. It was hard to push the door open and I found out why. A dead man blocked the door.

"Then," said Willis, “I saw a big pool of the red stuff on the floor.”

Burnett apparently died from suffocation due several lacerations across his neck, partially severing his trachea. Officials on the scene found similar markings on Burnett’s face, though these were scarred over.

“The wounds are similar to ones I’ve seen in dog bite incidents,” said one paramedic. “I definitely think it’s a dog bite.

“The wounds are remarkably vicious and deep,” he added, “but what’s odd in this case is that, based on the arch of the bite mark, the dog must have been kind of small.”

White animal fur, shed inside the broom closet, was found, corroborating that some animal mauled Burnett.

If it was a dog, officials could not explain how such a small animal managed to overwhelm Burnett, nor how it could have escaped the broom closet once the man was attacked.

Until the animal is found, citizens living or working around the JFK are encouraged to be on the lookout. Most of all, Animal Control officials say people should not approach any stray animals. They think the dog that killed Burnett is at large and could be rabid.
La Trobe, Wis.—As most of us already know, John Constantine, the star of Joe Schmoe, died recently in his home from a gunshot wound.

We will mourn all the more because the living room of Constantine and his wife, Julia, its dreamy celebrity guest appearances, its steam and lust, slapstick and irony tumbling across its plush brown carpeting, has been welcomingly pumped into our dens for several years, cherished like a Robert Wood forest landscape on our walls.

But what we have seen so far of Constantine’s life, the attic home and office...
blunders that made us laugh until we cried, and even his death, declared a suicide, is nothing compared to the footage viewers have never seen until now. Just released, the outtakes of television’s favorite real-life comi-drama show a side of Constantine that is stark, unnerving and, deemed by the show’s producer’s, too real for TV.

Meanwhile, those less versed in the life and times of John Constantine, looking at his auspicious and renowned celebrity, would never guess his inconspicuous beginnings.

Constantine first appeared in a segment of When Bosses Fight Back, a prime-time sweeps special that showed surveillance videos of office misconduct recorded by employers.

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“Clip—When Bosses Fight Back” >>transcript<< 2.3.1

Constantine sits at his desk, which looks instead like a smooth gray countertop arching around the corners of his cubicle.

He stares at a Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheet. Garishly bright, it reflects the contours of his black-rimmed glasses, the lenses of which reflect a vivid reverse picture of the buyer’s report on the flickering screen. In the stack of toolbars above the spreadsheet can be seen silhouettes of contrast between Constantine’s brown hair and his sweeping forehead.

His hand covering the mouse, Constantine slides the cursor to the Internet Explorer icon at the bottom of the screen. An auction site flares up, displaying DVD’s of old movies, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, My Fair Lady, and The Day the Earth Stood Still.

Now Constantine’s head is slightly cocked, ear facing the small room’s entrance. He hears metallic hinges creak. The door clicks shut. Frantically, Constantine thrusts the cursor down to the spreadsheet icon, crossing over it twice while the slippery mouse gets away from his fingers. He clicks the icon, and resumes typing.

Again, the hinges creak and the door clicks shut. Constantine returns to the auction site.

In an adept flick, he turns the scroll wheel of his mouse with his middle finger. The
Soon after the airing of *When Bosses Fight Back*, letters and e-mails poured in from viewers lauding the professional faux pas and torrential terminations they saw in the special. Producers quickly responded with another special, this time focusing on the comical Constantine.

Crews installed cameras in the Con-
stantine home under the waiting, starry eyes of John and Julia. TV viewers now enjoyed a blend of Constantine's blunders and gaffes at home as well as at work.

The new special, titled *A Day in the Life...*, was itself such a hit that producers turned the concept into a weekly television series.

Constantine’s life, edited into an hour-long dramatic comedy, *Joe Schmoe*, offered viewers the same raunch and rudeness with the addition of a meandering plot to detail Constantine’s meaty and humorous trials and tribulations.

What some critics considered just more of the same that burst onto the screen with *When Bosses Fight Back* shocked and delightfully enticed viewers.

Soon, chat rooms sprang up on the Internet, discussing the show’s action as it happened. Occasionally, producers would roll surfers comments across the bottom of the screen as the show played.

“Gawd, that’s worse than roadkill!” claimed one chatter called Philodomide in an episode when Constantine, in a rare moment convinced by Julia to do the cooking, shook off a swarm of ants from a plate of raw, seasoned chicken breast left out too long on the counter, seconds before Julia came into the kitchen to ask if he needed help. If an ant was simmered in the bed of rice they ate that night, no one but the viewers was the wiser.

But for all the ribaldry and viewer commentary, newly released footage shows a sinister angle to Constantine’s life that producers did not want people to see. Following some of *Joe Schmoe* most famous saucy and raucous scenes are candid moments for which taping didn’t stop. Such beloved and laughed at moments as when Constantine laboriously hides one of his viscous videotapes from an inspective
Julia fades into a recorded randy romp, never seen before until now.

"Outtake—Joe Schmoe" >>transcript<< 2.4.1

Constantine and Julia, a middle-aged woman, her thighs straining against red stretch pants, her back and chest filling up a blue sweatshirt, sit on the neat and boxy couch in their living room.

Constantine pulls Julia’s fleshy hand to his lap. “Please, please. It has been months,” implores Constantine.

“No – no. I just don’t want to,” his wife replies.

“Why? What’s wrong? Why? You … You aren’t attracted to me anymore … Please,” Constantine asks, pulling his T-shirt up a little and scratching his little bulbous stomach.

“No, dear. You are very good looking. I just don’t know. I don’t feel that way. I just don’t like sex.” Constantine’s eyebrows squinch. He looks at Julia’s hand in his lap.

“But why? What can I do?”

She looks up at the drawn beige curtains on the living room wall. “I don’t know. There’s nothing I guess you can do. I just – I don’t know – I just feel uncomfortable with all it all.”

“Is it because of how you feel about your weight? Dear, you’re not overweight. You’re beautiful. Beautiful.”

“No. I’m not. You’re just saying that. You don’t really believe that.”

“Yes I do,” responds Constantine, squeezing her hand a little. “As beautiful and thin as the day we met.”

“That’s not true,” says Julia.

“Please?” asks Constantine.

“I just…”

“Please? For me?”

“I—” she closes her eyes tightly and squeezes her painted lips together. “Okay. Okay.”

“Thank you,” says Constantine.

They stand. Constantine takes hold of his wife’s hand again and leads her. He
Cultivated by producers and editors, always amazing was how well the Constantine family took to the camera. They conducted their roles naturally. Even in the beginning, Julia’s eyes never glanced toward the cameras. John gave only rare looks of consternation, a silent “Why me?” which only fueled audience sympathy.

But many of the show’s cut takes show awkward moments, when maybe the
camera should not have been rolling, when
the producers found an uncomfortable re-
ality that may have turned viewers stom-
ach rather than tickle their funny bones.

Most amazing, then, is the producer’s
brand of editing that snipped, cut, and e-ased these scenes from the record of a Joe
Schmoe’s life.

Throughout the four years in which
Constantine lighted the screen, his house-
hold has gone through a number of chan-
ges, some of them revealed to viewers and
others hidden from unwary eyes.

After the shooting of When Bosses
Fight Back, Constantine was fired from his
cushy office job. As the concept for A
Day in the Life... unfolded, producers se-
cured an assistant manager’s position at
KFC for Constantine.

But what we never see is the pain and
suffering Constantine must have endured
in his seemingly comic life.

For instance, what footage in When
Bosses Fight Back does not include was
the mere suggestion of the pain felt by
Constantine at his termination. Less spec-
tacular footage shows a dull but personally
cataclysmic moment for Constantine.

"Outtake—When Bosses Fight Back” >>transcript<< 2.3.2

The senior buyer, a dark-skinned Brazilian man, walks around the short gray wall
into Constantine’s cubicle.

"Hey, ah, John. If you have a few moments, could you come to Jerry’s office?" asks the buyer.

In Jerry’s office, with a corner filled with neatly stacked documents and a desk
decorated with model cars, sit the senior buyer and two counselors from human re-
sources. Constantine walks in.

"Sit, John,” says the senior buyer. The two from human resources nod and lean
over, resting their elbows on their thighs. Constantine sits.

"Now John,” says the senior buyer, “this is very hard for us, but I’ll cut to the chase.
According to a close family friend of Constantine, "His firing was an attack on John's ego and his masculinity. If not for the second special and the series, I don't know what he would have done to himself."

Fortunately, Joe Schmoe kept him going.

Joe Schmoe did not merely keep Constantine's ego going. Two seasons in, Constantine met Andrea Dawdel at the food fast chicken restaurant he helped
manage.

In and outside the sight of viewers, they conducted an intense affair, meeting after hours at KFC and in the Constantine home while Julia was away at church or on errands.

But in the final season, the affair ended, when, as shown in another purged piece of Constantine’s life, tragedy struck in the midst of Constantine’s infidelity.

―Outtake—Joe Schmoe‖ >>transcript<< 2.4.2

Andrea, big boned, and Constantine face each other on his sofa in the living room. They kiss each other’s lips, cheeks, and necks slowly, lazily.

Constantine takes the lower lip of Andrea’s sweatshirt and pulls it up. Andrea raises her arms invitingly. He pulls off the shirt, revealing Andrea’s young, round, springy skin.

Constantine kisses Andrea’s formerly painted lips again. Much of the lipstick has already rubbed off onto his neck and around his mouth.

Constantine pulls himself closer to Andrea, draws his hands up her bare back, and unsnaps her bra. She leans her back into the couch as Constantine lowers his face to hers. He kisses her neck and naked shoulders.

Meanwhile, she reaches over to the remote, holds it with both hands up to her eyes, her arms wrapped around Constantine’s bony back. She clicks power and the screen flashes to the news.

Constantine pulls a hand forward and brushes Andrea’s left nipple with the back of his thumb. This pulls her attention from a story on rescued bobcats. She kisses Constantine back, guides him to sit, pulls herself up, and straddles Constantine’s lap.

Constantine places his hands on Andrea’s hips, kisses her face and chest.

The TV snaps a quick, violent red. “A seven car collision occurred just an hour ago,” says the anchorwoman, “injuring several and killing one . . .”

Constantine kisses underneath Andrea’s chin affectionately.

“. . . on highway 15, near New Jerusalem Lutheran Church, police on the scene confirmed . . .”

Constantine’s hands tighten on Andrea’s sides. He stops kissing her left shoulder.
Paparazzi and reporters swarming the hospital, viewers learned of Julia’s death not through the prime-time episodes flashing from their boob tubes, but on newspaper stands and CNN live coverage. Producers could not hide Julia’s death in time for next week’s airing, and, without Julia, they struggled to stand the show back on its feet.

Trying to continue the show, editors and writers now focused even more on the trials of lower management Constantine faced with teenage drive-in cashiers and drunken buffet customers, who filled the KFC all the more for the show’s success.

Producers even tried to reintroduce Andrea as Constantine’s girlfriend to simulate the show’s old ironies of romance and viewer’s heart-felt identification with Constantine’s humorous home-life.

The introduction of Constantine’s bachelorhood and dating life seemed like the perfect ratings boost, in line with the charged sexual heat and suspense of other
reality-based shows.

And ratings soared as viewers loathed Andrea with new frenzy, dismayed that Constantine would disregard the memory of his wife so swiftly after her death.

For continuity, the Constantine home remained primarily the same, and viewers cackled while Andrea turned down pictures of Julia and hid the housewife’s affectations found all around the house. Audiences’ vituperation and hatred glistened on Andrea.

Commented one on-line viewer, “Serves her well, Andrea doesn’t deserve a Valentine’s gift. All she deserves is a swift kick in the ass.”

But the dowdy miscommunications and floundering sexual escapades between Constantine and Dawdel, as opposed to the quick and nimble familial slapstick Joe Schmoe built its success on, spelled only brief success for the show.

Soon, Dawdel left the show, unable to cope with the hateful publicity and media attention that John and Julia managed so well. Said one source, best friend of Dawdel, “Andrea could not manage the spotlight. She was constantly scared that the public hated her. Once she said that while working the cash register [at KFC] a viewer spit on her. She wanted to spend her nights alone, with John, and without the camera and phone calls calling her a home-wrecker.”

And where Dawdel couldn’t stand the increased publicity, Constantine couldn’t stand the lack of it. Constantine, no longer caged against Dawdel, saw ratings plummet, customers avoid his KFC, and the fan
letters, which Constantine now sometimes read, dwindle.

Even Constantine couldn’t seem to stand the show. After Julia’s funeral, most cut clips showed Constantine watching himself on television and surfing the channels swiftly every several minutes. His eyes constantly flickered toward the zoom lens, pivoting digital camera opposite his chair.

This was a horrible change from the old, mild-mannered Constantine, who once explained in an interview that he and Julia never watched the show, never even read the fan letters, so that they could stay in their humble characters for the show.

Both critics and audiences predicted the end of the series, and in late March, producers aired the series’ finale, including the star’s disturbing death.

Due to its graphic nature, VirtuStar Entertainment, the company that produces Joe Schmoe, refused to release the series’ finale or a clip of Constantine’s suicide after its initial airing.

In the beginning of the last episode of Joe Schmoe, Constantine pulls himself out of his chair, walks outside, walks back inside, goes to his bedroom, puts on jeans, and walks back out the front door, slamming it.

Viewers watched a little prompt at the bottom of the screen as it flashed in white letters “Three hours later…” Lazy on-line chatters bickered and joked about what would happen next.

Then Constantine walks in with a small, brown, paper sack.

He removes his jeans and sits again in his lounging chair with the paper sack. He surfs the channels on his television, which he left on. Then he opens the sack, pulls out a revolver, and loads it.

He lifts the gun in two twitching hands
and aims at the wall to his front left, almost aligning the barrel on round, pivoting camera lens on the wall opposite him. He fires.

In less than two confusing seconds, viewers heard the gun’s speaker-shaking blast, a veering whine, and blinked to see Constantine limp in his chair.

The camera’s hard surface apparently deflected the bullet and sent it glancing at Constantine’s forehead.

Although critics usually consider suicide a trite and clichéd way in which to conclude a season, let alone a whole series, they did give high marks to the unique and complicated manner in which Constantine orchestrated his personal demise.

For many, though, Constantine’s suicide is a little too orchestrated. According to one critic, “The producers had a lot to gain from such a stunning finale. They had to know this would have to be Joe Schmoe’s last season and have since regained their reputation with the last ratings blast. The suicide could be no more than a scripted ploy in a show that has proven to be as much a Hollywood manipulation of reality as a humorous reflection of the hearts and minds of its viewers.”

The producers got their ratings, but the suicide sent a shock through the show’s audience, which wasn’t ready to see a live death on prime-time family television, and Virtue-Star promised the airing of the finale would be its last.
Nevertheless, the deflected blow to the show's watchful eye provided a keen message about the difficulty in maintaining the life of a celebrity.

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ROCKER, WRESTLER, WRITER, JACK B. KNIMBEL, RETURNS TO WOMB

Show Low, Ariz.—Arthur Janov, ground-breaking psychologist in the study of womb theory, once wrote, “The imprinting of early Pains into the infant’s developing nervous system accomplishes two things: first it sets up a lifelong pool of residual tensions, and second, it directs and shapes behavior in particular ways.”

To you and me, what all this pompous print means is that the way Momma made us (conceptually speaking), the way she carried us (prenatally speaking), and the way she squirted us out into the world (I think you get my meaning here) can decide for us whether we’ll be doctors or drug-dealers, lawyers or larcenists.

But all this baby talk takes a drastic turn for Jack B. Knimbel, also known as Leviathan on stage and ring. Without the flash and pizzazz of his celeb threads on stage with the band Hair Monsters or the buckling omnipotence of his penned wrestling move Swallow-You-Hole, this hair metal revivalist, former wrestler, and author of his autobiography *Open Windows, Closed Doors: Memoirs of Growing Up Poor in a Southwest Tourist Town*, returned to the womb, literally, so to speak, last
October.

I recently visited the fabulous fetus where he now rests comfortably in the Navapache Regional Medical Center in Show Low, Arizona after his "birth" from his prefabricated prenatal pad. My interview with Knimbel reveals all the pregnant details of his latest stint.

I guess I should ask, for the record, I said to Knimbel, what brings you to this hospital?

"Of course, you know it already. I was ripped out of my womb."

And Knimbel, now 48 years old, gave off something of a meek "just born" sensation, though one can tell by looking at him that it wasn't a pleasant labor.

A blurred patient lay and shivered in a hospital bed, his white sheets and white knit blanket tucked to his neck, under his slight double chin. Nothing the crest of success.

It all started for Knimbel at age eighteen when he left comforting cradle of Show Low, Arizona, for the gritty underbelly of Las Vegas.

While a teenager, Knimbel learned to play guitar from his mother, and when he got to America's gambling Xanadu, he immediately purchased an electric guitar and amplifier. It wasn't long before Knimbel met Gary Spivak, guitarist, and Steve Reynolds, drummer, and together they invented Hair Monsters.

Starting out in dingy Vegas clubs, where the rattle and beeps of slot machines sometimes drowned out the band, Hair Monsters started out covering the hits of Ziggy Stardust and Gary Glitter, Bon Jovi and Def Leppard. Soon, though, they wrote their own anthems, revitalizing and restyling seventies glam rock with eighties hair metal, giving it brand new, if brief, fanfare.

During the span of Hair Monsters' three albums and two world tours, Knimbel and his crew gallivanted in front of worldwide audiences and in plush hotel rooms, made it rich on the posters, records, action-figures, t-shirts, cartoons, and other commercial licenses the band signed.

But while Hair Monsters stirred up a maelstrom of fame, the band ate up four bass guitarists. Unable to find another, let alone
was left of the florid locks and tall, sculpted bangs of Knimbel’s hair metal days. His scalp was bald, his eyebrows and eyelashes too. His whole head was inhumanly pale and entirely puckered like fingertips too long in dishwater. Just over his cheekbone, and on the opposite cheek, and on a bit of his bottom lip, the surface of his skin looked eaten away to show more pale skin underneath. The patient’s eyes opened and closed meekly, reluctant to be wide, and shown blue-black irises.

Beside Knimbel, an heart monitor bleated periodically. An electric hum pervaded the hospital room. Liquids dripped from the IV, through a tube, to somewhere under the patient’s blankets.

*Your womb?* I ask. *Certainly, you’re not born yesterday, whatever ward you take residence in.*

“Of course,” said Knimbel, chuckling, “it isn’t literally the womb of my beginnings, my mother’s womb. We are mortals after all, governed by the laws and limitations of biology and physics. For that matter, my mother’s dead.

“I’m laying here, the same manly size I was before, and there’s no way I could ever be,
will ever be, nine pounds, ten ounces again.” The one time professional wrestler gestured to his former-glorious girth, now mostly gone. His skin bulged and sagged in places. His belly protruded and made a little hill in the white hospital blanket. But he still had the six foot, ten inch frame that gave him his ominous presence as he strode on stage, head to toe in a black vinyl jumpsuit and tightly laced boots, as Leviathan, lead singer of Hair Monsters.

“Heh, I wasn’t really born yesterday,” explained Knimbel. “I had returned to my womb, the womb that I built.” Indeed, Knimbel’s was a different endeavor. For sure, not a literal return to the womb, and for that matter, not a figurative, psychological return to the womb: “Any previous conception of a womb wouldn’t do. For me to return to the womb, I had to build one.”

He pulled his pale, naked arm out of the blanket and rested it beside him. “And I’d still be there too, but they ripped me out.” His shaky fist tightened, as if simulating the crushing grip he portended for an opponent in the ring.

“I was somersaulting and hand-springing in my womb, through the thick synth-amniotic fluid, trying to maintain my figure under the conditions I was left to endure, when this big, pumped-up man crawled in through the aperture in the base of my womb, threw his bulky arm around my neck, and yanked me out.

“All I saw at first was this slit of light where I had sealed up my womb after zipping myself in. The fluid started rushing out. The big dumb ass swam in and before I knew it, I was choking and gasping on the kitchen linoleum.

“You should have seen their faces though. My wife, her unkempt ponytail askew, the
dip-shit, and my two twelve year olds, Adam and Eve, blond haired and freckled, staring at me with fish eyes, shocked and horrified at what they did to me. They had no right to pull me from my womb. That is, my wife and the man-toy she acquired while I was inside. Apparently, not even Lucinda felt obligated to be faithful.

"The ranch was entirely paid for. It was my living room, my property, and my wishes, and they violated that."

*First thing’s first*, I responded. *Why did you return to the womb in the first place?* For a moment, Knimbel eyes blinked at me from his reclined head. It was no easy answer for him to chase down the bizarre moment of this urgency.

Finally, his eyes widened as he cocked a bald eyebrow. "My mom and I were really close, and I give this reason for why I think I remember being in her womb. I remember it in my earliest memories as a dark place, although colors came to me once and a while, like the dimmest phosphorescence. Usually it was a yellow light, though sometimes hues of blue or red, like my eyes played tricks on me. But whatever color it was, it showed all around me, as if dark could change color.

"In this memory I am always warm and nestled comfortably." Knimbel sputtered in reminiscent quiet.

(continued below)
His mother, Czarina Namzin, single and poverty-stricken, had six other children before him, all daughters. There, Knimbel’s mother eked out a living as a Laundermat attendant. Sometimes she’d make a little extra cleaning and folding the clothes of Arizona tourists that visited to see White Mountain and the lakes surrounding Show Low, but she still struggled to make enough to feed Knimbel and his six sisters.

After his career as Leviathan of Hair Monsters and his four-year stint as a professional wrestler by the same name, Knimbel met his wife, Lucinda, and by age 34, still collecting a healthy income from royalties, Knimbel settled down. He had bought a ranch near Show Low years earlier, and Lucinda, at the time a blushing 24-year-old Show Low native herself, married Knimbel and moved in. Two years later, Lucinda gave birth to fraternal twins, Adam and Eve.

During my interview with him, Knimbel said a lot about his experience with Hair Monsters, his youth, and his choices in life:

Q: When you went on stage as Leviathan, the makeup and outfits you wore on tour, dressed in a black vinyl suit, high-heel boots, draped in your trademark sky blue makeup, gills painted on your neck, holographic breastplate depicting a vaguely humanoid figure clutching ribs, teeth filed to sharp points, the big, blue, teased hair, are part of what made you so famous. What was the purpose of it? Was it to hide any insecurity and make it possible to go on, or was the reason?

A: No, I wasn’t hiding myself, any more than a woman hides herself with makeup. The costumes and makeup the band and I wore were to accentuate a side of ourselves. Each of us took on the persona of a famous monster in the gents mind, the monsters that shake up people’s psyche. I

(continued from above)

How do you know, though, I say, to break the waters of silence, that this distant memory is of your mother’s womb? Couldn’t it just be a memory so distant, so detached, that you have no feelings attached to it, and that’s why you feel contentment about it? Or, maybe it’s the memory of a sleeping child wrapped in a quilt, safe and cozy in his room?

Knimbel responded sharply, his head raised, his body stiff. “It does you
no journalistic good to question what I remember. You’ll only bore people with all these inquiries you’d probably call ‘objective’ and ‘thorough.’

“My memories are probably more keen and exact than yours or anyone’s. I’ve had far more time to meditate and recollect them.

“A child doesn’t feel safe and cozy in the dark. Bedtime is a fearful and alienating experience, filled with the threat of hobgoblins and boogiemen.

“And I have another reason to believe in the veracity of my memories. When I was five or six, maybe as early as four, my mother would ask me why I was born so late. I was over a month late, the placenta was rotting, and I made no sign that I was ever coming out. The doctor performed a C-section to remove me. When she asked, I invariably said that it was because I had
everything I wanted. There was no reason to be born. I was entirely content.

“You see, I always had this memory of the womb. And before we get into any philosophical discussions about my contentment there, I’ll tell you this. I know a good thing when I see it. I always have.”

He smiled. His famous wicked grin looked evil on his new appearance.

“When it comes down to it, all we are looking for are the creature comforts. That’s all anyone is looking for; the man that says otherwise is lying to himself. And I always knew where they were at.”

Well, How’d this idea of returning to the womb come about?

Knimbel smiled harder. “It’s at RT’s Black Bull, a bar in Show Low, that I started toying with the idea of returning to the womb. It took about
Drugs repulse me. I won't touch a woman who's high or smells like alcohol. I can never understand why a woman would put so much effort in making her face and mouth beautiful only to make her breath repulsive with tobacco and beer. I want to breathe every moment of life, not numb my senses to it. When I have an escapade with a woman, I want to sense every second of it. And if she dulls her senses with drugs, if she doesn't want to enjoy every second of me like I want to enjoy every second of her, she's out on her ass.

Q: In fact, your life's been one big dalliance. You mentioned that you don't believe in monogamy. But you did eventually get serious.

A: Yes. Because I also believe that you can love someone, love several people, really, and it doesn't have to do with sex. I made no promise to my wife that I'd be faithful. That's what women want, after all. They always say they want a man that doesn't lie. I've always been absolutely honest with her.

I met Lucinda at a sports bar, RT's Black Bull. I worked at a cabinet factory in the industrial park near town. Not that I had to. I had the time on my hands, and I've always had an industrious philosophy. 'Idle hands.'

twelve years before I actually implemented my plan, but at RT's, while eating my dinner, I would scratch out doodles and ideas on the napkins.

"I started by drawing perfectly round bubbles. Then I drew one large bubble, complete with the little bent rectangle of glancing light off to the side to give the bubble dimension. Soon, I started drawing myself in it, or at least a stickman in it. "First, I just drew a regular stick figure, then I started drawing these doodles with the stick figure engaging in daily activity, sleeping, sitting. Pretty soon, I drew him flipping around and performing acrobatics in the bubble.

"After a while, my fascination with the bubble really took shape, and I drew apparatus surrounding the bubble and wrote out plans to make such a bubble livable."
Womb Prototypes

About to describe his plans for the womb, Knimbel’s black eyes gleamed, and he shifted in his bed restlessly.

“You see, I’ve always had very personal and very comfortable relationship with vinyl.”

So, he built the walls, floor, and ceiling of his womb out of shiny black pleather, all sewn together, and erected the womb in his living room. He sealed the seams and the zipper he used as the entrance to the womb with a resin, something Knimbel called, “a cross between axel grease and silly putty.”

He even developed a liquid to simulate amniotic fluid, with which he filled the
“Of course,” he explained. “I still needed to breathe, evacuate, and eat. So I concocted a filter and pump that would keep the synth-amniotic fluid filled with fresh oxygen, sort of a gigantic version of a filter someone might use on a fish tank. Then, I designed breathing apparatus that I placed in and around my nose and mouth. It took the synth-amniotic fluid in and extracted the oxygen for me to breathe.

“To urinate and defecate, I stole shamelessly from NASA, and designed a sort of vacuum for the job.

“I also had a feeding tube that extended generously from the wall of my womb. Adam and Eve were supposed to pour in a vitamin-rich protein drink.”

“Supposed to,” because after several months, Knimbel’s plan went awry. Adam and Eve poured in the protein
drink less and less frequently. Knimbel started to become weak and frail. His body started eating up the round, sinewy muscles that had always been the fame of Leviathan the wrestler. Weak and malnourished, he exercised less frequently, but Knimbel persisted to carry out his dream of living in his womb. And it took its toll.

“I used to engage in daily exercises while in the womb, a series of flips, somersaults, handsprings, and other acrobatics, but when the twins failed to feed me, I barely had the strength to keep up activity.

“I was never really able to account for a bacterium that lived in the sugary synth-amniotic fluid. I should have built in a better filter, but I already built myself into my womb and was unwilling to exit it and make changes. Still, my body was able to fight the bacteria
off quite well, when I was fit and fed. Afterward, it started eating at my epidermis.”

Knimbel had returned to the womb last October, and by early August, he was ripped out of it in what Knimbel calls, a “petty and salacious act.” He still incubates at the Show Low hospital, pinching the butts of nurses as lecherously as he did his groupies, while he recovers from delivery trauma and doctors search for long term side effects to Knimbel’s most recent gestation.

Finally, I asked him a question about his future plans. So what will you do next? There are some who’ll think that this was another of Leviathan’s stunts to renew the old glory of his hair metal days or the majesty of muscle he enjoyed bodyslamming and clotheslining con-tenders in the ring. Will you rise from this hospital bed as a new mythic media icon? The Fetus, or Jonah the Prophet?

“Of course, I can’t say whether my new hardships will emerge into new toy deals or breakfast cereals. Audiences just love stories of rise and fall and rise again. I am not so deluded as to suggest that I wouldn’t jump at the chance. It would be far too juicy. Until then, though, I’m staying right here.”

In Show Low? I ask.
“No, in this hospital. There are you, and others, who would be annoyed at laying here all day, while doctors and nurses fiddled with the dials and buttons on their machines, agitated when LPN’s adjusted the picture of the frigate on the wall, buffeted and impaled by its torrential waves. Someone like you might be aggravated that the staff would waste time and money on the aesthetics of the room, to put up pictures, when they have your misfortune and discomfort to think about.

“But I know a good thing when I see it. I’m cared for. I’m fed. I’m cleaned up four times a day. This is the most pleasurable place to be right now.”

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EVERY ONCE in a while I give over my fancy-filled pages for more serious . . . Did I say the “S” word?—Well, then I did, but the I assure you it will be no less Sensational and Stimulating.

Here’s an update on an oddity that slipped into my pages several months ago. The headline read, “CHILD DIVORCES PARENTS.”

Indeed, one tutored tyke, twelve-year-old Ted Cleaver of Christie Heights Middle School Public Academy, wrote an uncanny essay for a school contest that wrote his family rift. This kid caused a quake that led to a court-mandated cleft in the rock of wedlock between his parents, Jude and Wanda. Presumably. Another look at the Cleavers show how even the hammer of justice cannot crack the foundation of a marriage based on love.

--Trent Sands
editor and journalist

Child Divorces Parents: Made for TV
I ALSO dredged up seedy details from the Cleavers and their neighbors. Their observations, interviews, exclamations prove the ripe stuff for a reenactment of the events that led to the nuptial negation:

Pittsburgh, Penn.—It’s been months now since Judge Dick Richards made the verdict to divorce Jude and Wanda Cleaver because of the revelations of one little class assignment.

Once Liam Grainey, the Cleaver child’s English teacher, read the essay to the PTA one Monday night, domestic hell ascended on the Cleaver family.

Like any worthwhile, embroiling news story, the fiasco led to searches in homes, children in custody, and screaming matches in courtrooms. At one point, Wanda Cleaver was hauled away in the middle of her fit of rage in front of the bald, wooly bearded judge. In another, when the despot child read his essay to the court, the roes and

(continued below)

In the first place, thought Jude Cleaver, Ted is no troublemaker. The worst he’d ever done was go out to the railroad tracks behind the house, under
rails from those attending nearly delivered the judge’s verdict right there:

“Henceforth, you are divorced! Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver, please approach the bench. Maybe in time, when the both of you can accept the barriers between you, accept that marriage can’t be, never should have been, some resolutions can be met. This court will work with you to return these poor children to a more settled and accepting household, one that, nonetheless broken, will still be the peaceful and stable place that our young people need.”

Indeed, despite the Cleavers' plea for their marriage and for their children, the judge did decide their schismmed fate and condemned them to marital absolution.

But months after the decimating blow to suburban domesticity, one can see a new order in the Cleaver household, that pieces the family puzzle together, equitably, for everyone involved: the children, the parents, the courts, and the neighborhood.

(continued below)

the viaduct where Claris Street jumped across, and experimented with what happened to a rusty can of black spray paint when one put a lighter beneath it.

In the second place, thought Wanda Cleaver, if that was so bad, it was more because he’s sometimes a danger to himself than a class clown, or a smart mouth, or a hooky artist, or a vandal.

Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver thought this as they drove to their son’s school Friday afternoon at bequest of his sixth grade middle school English teacher, Liam Grainey.

Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver parked in the broken lot adjacent to west side of the brown-bricked Christie Heights Middle School
Public Academy. The front doors faced the south side, and the other metal doors to schools in this neighborhood were chained up and locked after students let out, so the Cleavers had a little walk ahead them from their little silver Ford to the third floor room where Mr. Grainey waited. Mrs. Cleaver tidied the lip of fabric where her blouse was tucked into her skirt while Mr. Cleaver tossed his navy blazer onto the car seat and rolled up his white sleeves.

The couple knew little of what to expect when Mr. Grainey called them to the school this afternoon. Ted had never been any trouble, with his A's and B's he brought home on tests and reports cards, with that it was only a couple months into his sixth grade year and the Cleavers hadn't even a parent-teacher conference with Mr. Grainey. Except their brief visit at the Christie Heights Open House, and polite hellos at PTA meetings, they barely knew Ted's English teacher.

But when he called on the phone, Mr. Grainey's tone was serious. "Mrs. Cleaver," he said, "I have something important to talk about with you."

And when, upon Mrs. Cleaver's direction, Mr. Cleaver
picked up the other phone and asked, jeeringly, what was the matter, the teacher said, "Oh. Well. Mr. Cleaver... How surprising to hear you there..."

"Heh, well I'm usually home early on Fridays. Always a slow work day," replied Mr. Cleaver, loosening his tie. "I thought teachers probably did the same."

By this time, Ted, sitting at the table, already looked up from his story problems, switching his head back and forth between his parents at opposite sides of the kitchen.

"Yes, um... maybe we can talk about that too," said Mr. Grainey. "But I have important news about Ted. Can you come down to the school? Together, if that's alright with you?"

Mrs. Cleaver agreed to the teacher as Mr. Cleaver pulled the knot of his tie to his neck once again.

Before they left the house, they questioned Ted: "Why would your English teacher want to speak with us?"

Ted pulled his head up from his textbook and shrugged. "I dunno."

For a moment, Mrs. Cleaver stared at Ted, who stared back. Mr. Cleaver was in the kitchen doorway, wobbling on one foot, struggling to put on his shoe.

"Watch Syd," he said from the doorway. "She's in her
room."

"I know," replied Ted.

They left their son at the table, studying math.

Now, in step together, Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver jumped the curb from the parking lot to the school's perimeter sidewalk. The hem of Mrs. Cleaver's pleated skirt swaggered softly next to the crisp shifting cuffs of Mr. Cleaver's gray gabardines.

The Cleavers just weren't the kind of family that was called in by a sixth grade middle school English teacher. They were, thought Mr. Cleaver, a strictly nuclear family in a strictly middle-class, not-too-suburban, neighborhood. Folks owned their houses, but they were squat repetitious numbers, each stuccoed in white or off-white (the Cleavers' was off-white).

The people here were basically good. But they had had to make choices. This wasn't a bad thing either, thought Mr. Cleaver. People make choices in life. And the choices of some led them here. Finding good work was hard, for some, getting training is hard, and the folks of Blockridge Avenue were at least stalwart enough to buy their homes. For the Cleavers, the little borough of Christie Heights was a choice all the same. If, thought Mr. Cleaver, Wanda was to stay home and raise
Ted and Syd—until they entered school—on his salary, which he made selling telescopic lift handlers to RentAll's across the country, where at first he stood the line inserting O-rings in the machines' hydraulics, if they were to stick every dime they could into their Roth IRA, and retire early, it meant a home on blacktop streets that were clean but littered with hastily filled potholes. It meant a neighborhood where one didn’t leave his lawn mower out on the lawn or let his child leave a bicycle lying on the sidewalk out front, but at least he didn’t have to worry about guns or drugs.

And, she remembered, there were times, when children from the apartments nearby took step ladders to the dumpsters, dug out other people's domestic paraphernalia: cardboard boxes, dirty magazines, and clock radios. Surely, there was enough trouble from other kids in the Christie Heights that they weren’t called in for any harm Ted could do.

They reached the school’s heavy double doors. Mr. Cleaver pulled one open and guided his wife through, his hand on the small of her back. Together they walked...
the inclined hallway to the East branch of the elementary school. Mrs. Cleaver, though, did not fidget her hands. And Mr. Cleaver did not prod his thumb at the class ring on his right hand. They walked side-by-side, hand occupied by hand.

Mr. Grainey, a middle-aged and gentlemanly looking man, with his bushy yellow mustache and thick brown glasses, met them at the door of room 322. Mrs. Cleaver entered the room first and the teacher said good afternoon!, immediately shook Mrs. Cleaver's hand, and rested his other hand on her arm briefly and warmly.

As the teacher guided Mrs. Cleaver into the classroom, Mr. Cleaver followed, the tips of his fingers touching the small of his wife's back.

Just inside the door, Mr. Cleaver stuck out his hand to Mr. Grainey in the gesture of a handshake. Mr. Grainey looked Mr. Cleaver up and down for a moment, then lightly grasped his stuck out hand.

"I'm glad," started Mr. Grainey, "you're both here."

"What did he do?" responded the parents, Mrs. Cleaver urgently, looking down as the teacher rested himself on one of the classroom desks, Mr. Cleaver distractedly, even jovially, while he scoured the wall of diamond-shaped poems about
Autumn and Spring for his son's name.

"Nothing bad, I assure you," said Mr. Grainey. He hesitated as both the Cleavers now turn toward him, pivoting narrowly on their shoes, triangulating the teacher's voice. "Something good in fact."

The Cleavers' shoulders loosened in their joints. They relaxed and smiles brightened their faces. They walked to the desks near Mr. Grainey. Mrs. Cleaver sat on one and Mr. Cleaver grasped her hand as he remained standing.

Mr. Grainey surmised them, back and forth. "You see, he wrote a splendid essay, handed it in Wednesday for a school essay contest on family life."

"An essay?" asked Mr. Cleaver, while Mrs. Cleaver said, "I don't even remember him working on one this last week."

"You don't think he cheated, do you?" asked Mr. Cleaver. "Neither of us wrote it for him." He looked at Mrs. Cleaver, who nodded.

"Oh no, oh no," replied Mr. Grainey. "I have no doubt the essay is your son's. He's a very bright boy. Of course, I had him read the essay out loud to class, which he was glad to do."

"Out loud?" asked Mr. Cleaver, astounded.

"He means," said Mrs.
Cleaver, "I mean... are you sure you have the right boy? He's kind of quiet."

"Heh, he's so quiet that, once, we were afraid he was slow," yelped Mr. Cleaver, whose comment turned sheepish at Mr. Grainey's stare. "Heh."

"But that's not why I asked you here," Mr. Grainey continued. "Ted is a bright boy—" Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver smiled hard, "This essay only shows just how bright he is. Now, I know he's not a straight-A student. But that might be from a certain lack of motivation... The school has volunteered the expense for a battery of intelligence tests. He may be skipped a grade or two... May possibly have the opportunity to go to a school for the gifted. Christie Heights Middle School Public Academy is affiliated with Krestow School of Advancement. We can probably get him in the door for little charge. They are always ready to take disadvantaged youths."

"Disadvantaged?" cried Mr. Cleaver, clenching his wife's hand. "Now, wait a minute. We may not be affluent, but we're not poor. We're not collecting from the government or anything. We're certainly not disadvantaged."

"No, well... Of course Ted is well cared for, but I mean the divorce."

"What divorce?" claimed the Cleavers.
"Your separation and divorce? Ted wrote all about it in his essay." Mrs. Cleaver stood up next to her husband. Mr. Grainey stood to match.

"That's why you called us in about Ted's essay, isn't it." asked Mrs. Cleaver.

"Because he lied in his essay. Ted has a wild imagination, sometimes, but we can talk to him about taking his homework seriously."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that he could have made it up?" remarked Mr. Cleaver.

"Not at all. In fact, he suggested you'd react this way in his essay.

"I'm sorry, but the essay doesn't sound made up. According to Ted, you're going through a divorce. The assignment was a personal essay, nonfiction, and he succeeded, exceeded!, the expectations of
the assignment, Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver. You should be proud. It’ll be read at the next PTA meeting. I think it’ll be as enlightening to parents as it was for the kids."

While Mr. Grainey made his speech, the Cleavers walked down the desk aisle, away from him. Now, they faced him, still standing. "That’s all fine," griped Mrs. Cleaver, "But we’re not divorced. We’re not going through a divorce. The essay is a lie!"

"It can’t be read at the next PTA meeting," responded Mr. Cleaver. "Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver," replied the teacher from a spot in front of the dry-erase board, "I don’t mean to upset you, but... No. According to Vince Beadly, attorney at law in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, it can. "In fact," says Beadly, "no fault divorce comes out of common law divorce statutes."

Apparently, the statutes that apply to common law marriage extend as well to common law divorces. If either Gary or Sheila dehabilitates their malignrous flat and let on like he or she left the bridal bed once and for all, then the court can declare them done. Beadly assures us, though, courts of justice don’t commonly recognize common law divorce. The only such case in Pennsylvania seems to be the Cleavers vs. The State of Pennsylvania, in which Judge Dick Richards used these esoteric edicts to annul the couple’s nuptials.
It's apparent you're faking it. You're not only telling me you're married, which may technically be true right now, but you're exuding closeness, the hand holding, the shoulder touching, your 'husband's' stern look at me 'because of' your 'wife's' chagrin.

"You're obviously faking it, putting on a front, making a show that only exaggerates, in its attempt, how unreal it all is. What need would there be for you to act so close, unless of course you were making a cover.

"You've been married, what?, thirteen years? I've been married 25 myself. I know how married couples act, Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver. Ted's essay explains it all for me."

The Cleavers stood side by side at the door to room 322 "That essay," said Mrs. Cleaver, "won't be read at the PTA meeting. We'll see to that."

Mrs. Cleaver spun around and trotted out and down the hallway. Mr. Cleaver followed vigorously and slammed Mr. Grainey's door. The poems rustled on the wall.

As the Cleavers drove home from Christie Heights Middle School Public Academy in their little silver Ford,
they were silent. Mrs. Cleaver, who drove, intently watched the street. Mr. Cleaver looked down at his knees, where he rested his hands, then examined the crack in plastic door of the glove compartment.

Of course, thought Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver, they did not heed the warnings. Not, of course, when his son asked them how long they had been married (fourteen years, having given birth to their prodigal son about two years later), not when he had asked them what they knew of divorce law (it wasn't much).

Each of them now marveled at the devilishness lurking in their son. Their son, thought Mrs. Cleaver, who'd blame his wet pants on the dog. Ted, thought Mr. Cleaver, would sit outside, cushioned by his diaper, and eat ants burrowing out of sidewalk cracks on warm sunny days.

Mrs. Cleaver pounded through the front doorway of the house and stood, shoulders back, one foot in front of the other. Mr. Cleaver, his navy blazer back on, entered just after her and slammed the door, for effect.

The couple hounded around the house, upstairs and down, slamming doors of rooms, cabinets, and closets. But Ted was playing with Syd in her room.

"Ted, get out here!" But he didn't heed until
Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver stood outside Syd’s room. Ted stood bent over, moving Syd’s Raggedy Ann doll to dance. Syd, though, not to be outdone, shot Barbie dolls onto the bed like human cannonballs, with intricate and exaggerated volleyball serves.

“Ted!” yelled Mrs. Cleaver. “Get out of there now!”

Ted followed his parents down the hallway and to the kitchen, where he took a proffered seat at the kitchen table with his parents.

“Your English teacher,” said Mr. Cleaver, “called us in about an essay you handed in for a contest.”

“Yeah?” asked Ted.

“Well?” asked Mr. Cleaver.

“Well, what?” asked Ted.

“How could you tell your teacher we were divorced!” wailed Mrs. Cleaver, hotly.

“I didn’t,” said Ted. “I said you were divorcing—”

“Don’t get technical with us! Why did you do that? Why did you lie?” interrogated Mrs. Cleaver.

“I dunno,” murmured Ted.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

Ted shrugged and rested his harms on the heavily varnished tabletop, his elbow landing in a glob of dried catsup.

“Listen to me,” said Mr. Cleaver, “Let us see this essay.”

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“The only copy I had I
gave to Mr. Grainey for the contest. I worked on it at the school computers."

"Of all the. . ." whispered Mr. Cleaver, looking at his wife, who continued the lecture. "Your teacher wants to read that essay at the PTA meeting Monday night. Do you know what that would do to your parents? Do you know what we'd have to do? How embarrassing that would be? What excuses we'd have to make for you? Do you know how that makes us feel."

"If that essay," grumbled Mr. Cleaver, leaning close to Ted's face, "is read to the parents and teachers, there will be hell to pay." He slapped his hands together loudly, making Ted jump. Ted shrugged.

"Don't shrug at me. Listen," ordered Mrs. Cleaver. "You go to class on Monday and you tell your teacher that you won't give him permission to read that essay you wrote at the PTA meeting."

Ted stared, his big ears red.

"All right?" asked Mrs. Cleaver, staring back. "Okay."

"Now go to your room. You're grounded."

Ted stood from the chair and gathered his books, which still lay about the kitchen table. Arms folded to his chest, one cover of his math text stuck out below his arms. His notebook nearly
slipped out from underneath his grip.

He walked out of the kitchen, Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver's eyes following him, into the adjoining hallway and down a couple stairs.

"I don't go anywhere, anyway!" yelled Ted. His feet pounded down the stairs rapidly.

Monday came and that evening's PTA meeting was nearly under way.

The parents of Christie Heights Middle School Public Academy Parent Teacher Association waited in student desks in a classroom divided down the middle with a plastic, railed curtain. The curtain was open, the desks on each side merged, and men and women, young and old parents, young and old teachers, hustled about, chatting, laughing, guffawing, shuffling papers, pushing and scooting desks around restlessly.

Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver sat sternly next to each other in desks in the middle of the adjoined classrooms.

"Did he tell his teacher not to read that damn essay?" asked Mr. Cleaver.

"That's what he said," replied Mrs. Cleaver. She closed her mouth askew.

"Good. Can you believe our kid?" commented Mr. Cleaver. "And to think we wouldn't have known if that teacher didn't call us to the
school. And he doesn't even believe us!”

“Hmm. He gets it from you.”

“Ha! You're the storyteller. You get it wrong all the time too.”

“Hmm.”

Folks settled into desks or leaned against walls as the President of the PTA, Laura Neal, husked her body from a desk, sending it scraping along the floor a couple inches, and plodded in front of the dry-erase board.

“Ahem.” The parents and teachers of the PTA quieted and stilled. “We'll begin tonight's meeting with a couple announcements before we get down to business.” Laura Neal’s head dropped toward a note card she cupped in her palm. “We’ll be voting on the annual fundraiser next week. Those with any ideas on what to sell this year, please come up with your suggestions tonight. Otherwise, Marina talked to the Crowned Capers candy company, who we went with last year, to sell candy bars.”

Laura Neal paused and breathed deeply through her nose. “Also, we need volunteers—Parents in the back, I can hear you!—for a committee on intramural extracurricular activities for students at the school, which would be a great way to get all our kids, even the non-athletic ones, involved out-
side of the classroom.

"Before we get to business, though, Mr. Grainey has something for us. . . . Mr. Grainey?"

Mr. Grainey, his orange short-sleeved dress shirt pulling a little out of his waistband, his tie loosened and his top button undone, his speckled neck showing, walked up in front of the dry-erase board just as Laura Neal hoofed back to her desk.

"I have," said Mr. Grainey. "The winner of the student essay contest 'My Family and What We Do.' The winner is Ted Cleaver, son of fellow PTA members Jude and Wanda Cleaver. His essay is titled, 'My Parents'
As he announced this, Mr. Grainey sauntered around to the teacher's desk at the front of class and sat on it comfortably.

The Cleavers' faces darkened, eyes slitted, eyebrows looming. They pivoted their necks to look around the room from their middle vantage. They sunk in their desks. Parents all around looked them over, smiling, then looked away, at papers, at blank desktops, or at each other, questioningly.

"Ahem. 'My Parents' Divorce' by Ted Cleaver." Mr. Grainey, sitting on the desk, looked down, through his glasses, at papers in his lap.

Mrs. Cleaver nudged Mr.
Cleaver with her elbow. He looked at her and shrugged, his palms upraised. She whispered something unintelligible at him, and he slammed his hand on the desk.

Mr. Grainey's reading was unhindered. "... he lays out on the bed, watching TV with the remote. When my mom gets home from work an hour later, she does the same thing. She kicks off her heels, pulls off her skirt, and gets into bed. By that time, my dad is taking a nap. My mom doesn't take over the TV. . . ."

As he read, some parents straightened their ties, some their t-shirts. Some flattened their dresses, or
their skirts. Some loosened the cuffs of their jeans where they were caught on their shoes. The Cleavers glowered at the teacher.

"... when they return to that bed together is when I realize it. My dad mashes up the beans in his mouth. My mom twirls up a forkful of spaghetti. They both stare at the television, lights on, blankets up to their chest. They don't say a word to each other."

Some stuck their legs gawkily out the sides of their desks. Some looked down at their fingernails, and others looked to be counting the little pocks in the tiles of the drop ceiling. The Cleavers closed
their eyes and shook their heads.

Mr. Grainey continued to read the Cleaver child's indictment, "... movie in the DVD player."

And suddenly Mr. Grainey's recitation prompted Wanda Cleaver unequivocally. She punched Jude Cleaver's arm. She whispered like steam at him. You brought porn into our house?

And Jude whispered back. No. You know the kid's lying—he shrugged.

You did! You—

"Shhh." hissed Laura Neal's tongue at Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver.

"... He parked in front of the house, and my sister and I ran to the house be-
fore he did. He was still getting our stuff from the car. My sister ran upstairs, to her room I guess, and I ran downstairs to go to my room. We had a shower in the laundry room downstairs. I only looked for a second, but I thought I saw . . .”

Who brought porn into the house?, seethed Jude. And the real life kind. . .

We were separated at the time, Jude. Why were you even coming in?—

I can’t see my wife, huh?. . .

A couple parents stared at Jude and Wanda and silenced them quickly. The two shuffled in their desks, not staring at each other.

“. . . he went out to the bar with his work friends. When my sister and I woke up, he was in the hallway by the stairs. He was drunk and stumbling, and my mom was angry and yelling at him. Yelling about how he leaves her home with us kids and he spends his paycheck before he gets home and how they had bills to pay. . .”

Mrs. Cleaver jumped to her feet. A heel on her shoe busted and skittered on the floor. “Hell, I wish we were divorced!”
Mr. Cleaver got up also. He rested his hands on the desk-
top, leaned into Wanda. "If I had known . . ." he breathed, "any of this I wouldn’t have come back!" He sat back down.

Mrs. Cleaver stamped past the desks, the parents, and out the door, limping on her broken shoe.

Mr. Cleaver shifted and cringed. Then he stood back up and walked out.

". . . a loop with the belt and put it around his neck, holding the end of the belt that went over the bar with his hand. ‘I can’t do anything right! I’m going to commit suicide!’ My sister and I begged . . . ."

Thus, Mr. Grainey’s reading was unhindered.

(continued from above)

Based on the accounts of neighbors and the Cleavers themselves, one can arrange an evocative ending to these
elapsed injustices.

We know, of course, that the same night the bomb was dropped, the essay read to the meeting of parents and teachers in the Christie Height's community, the Cleaver household erupted. Fearing the safety of the Cleaver children and parents alike, neighbors called police after they heard the bewildering cries of children, the monstrous verbal assaults of lovers, and the crashes and thrashes that echoed from the two-level stucco house on little dead-end Blockridge Street. The lie that had been subtly fostered in poor Ted's home finally festered its wounds.

Police arrived at the house to a crowd surrounding the embattled home. Folks at the scene told the authorities about the heartbreaking essay and split their ranks for the badges and blue. After many hours, the neighbors waiting all the while, Child Protective Services of Pitts...
burgh emerged with Ted Cleaver and his sister, Sydney, the girl bawling on the social worker’s shoulder, the boy marching stalwartly ahead.

At the police station, the Cleavers argued and wailed to get their children back, but the police crossed their arms and stood their ground, telling the Cleavers that it was now a case for the social workers.

In the early morning, before the sun rose, Jude and Wanda drove home, went to bed, still clothed in the professional attire they wore at the PTA meeting, wound their exhausted legs together, until, finally asleep, they loosened and rolled quietly around in the bed.

But of course, that wasn't the end of the Cleavers' story.

After the court decision that forced a divorce on the two pejorative parents, Jude Cleaver moved out of the house, and the children were returned. Custody rights were given to Wanda Cleaver, and visitation rights to Jude.

Weeks later, though, Jude moved back in. And the courts that insisted on his removal could do nothing to stop the Cleaver reunion. They had just enough jurisdiction to order Jude and Wanda's divorce. They had none to demand where the hardened husband slept at night. And after the media mayhem that ensued over the divorce, the nationally broadcast criticism, and questions about its power to absolve a marriage, officials weren't willing to get their hands any dirtier.

As for those vigilant parents and teachers of the community so concerned for the family's welfare, they had only praise to report about the reunited family.

According to community members, at PTA meeting, the Cleavers now bickered; they prodded and goaded. They made lewd jokes about Mr. Cleaver being lazy, loafing about the house, only finishing half of any household repair project, about Mrs. Cleaver burning the house down with her cooking and needing to get a job that paid for her expensive tastes.

Neighbors revealed that Mr. Cleaver was out of touch, jovial with the children, munificent and reverent when explaining to Ted how to mow the lawn, to fix a bicycle, and shy when explaining to the children the social mechanisms of sex.

Mrs. Cleaver continued waitressing, made meatloaf with cornflakes and Little Debbies for dessert.

According to friends, they couldn't be happier, reunited, vowed, and it occurred to
everyone in Christie Heights that they were, in fact, married. Oh, maybe they hadn’t performed their vows again, gotten that little piece of paper they had expunged so long ago, but they lived and loved, bickered and bitched, moaned and groaned, so that sometimes the sound left the walls and windows and the neighbors heard.

Sometimes the lawn was overgrown a little, or the house, seen by the Express deliveryman, was untidy.

They were married, if not by law. Folks agreed, wouldn’t some common law ordinance kick in soon anyway? After all, they lived together, divorced, thick in sin. And didn’t they belong together, as Mrs. Cleaver bitched on the phone, while Mr. Cleaver spent his Friday nights at the bar? Couldn’t one see it when Mrs. Cleaver would sometimes join him at the bar? He’d act like an amorous stranger, buy her a drink, pat her ass, make lewd innuendos, and she’d respond with quirked eyes, and late that night they’d stumble drunk to their rusting Ford, a couple dents on the driver’s side door, in each other’s arms, Mrs. Cleaver kissing and fondling Mr. Cleaver’s shirt buttons as they drove home.