

finally addressed the issue in Mock Court. His right hand still gripping the steering wheel, Atwater's head was now rotated just as far as it would go in order to look more or less directly into Amber's great right eye, whose lashes ruffled his hair when she fluttered them. No more than a quarter moon of tire now showed above the mud on each of the right side's wheels.

What Amber appeared now to be confiding to him in the rented Cavalier struck Atwater as extremely open and ingenuous and naked. The sheer preterite ugliness of it made its admission almost beautiful, Atwater felt. Bizarrely, it did not occur to him that Amber might be speaking to him as a reporter instead of a fellow person. He knew that there was an artlessness about him that helped people open up, and that he possessed a measure of true empathy. It's why he considered himself fortunate to be tasked to WHAT IN THE WORLD rather than entertainment or beauty/fashion, budgets and prestige notwithstanding. The truth is that what Amber Moltke was confiding seemed to Atwater very close to the core of the American experience he wanted to capture in his journalism. It was also the tragic conflict at the heart of *Style* and all soft organs like it. The paradoxical intercourse of audience and celebrity. The suppressed awareness that the whole reason ordinary people found celebrity fascinating was that they were not, themselves, celebrities. That wasn't quite it. An odd thing was that his fist often stopped altogether when he thought abstractly. It was more the deeper, more tragic and universal conflict of which the celebrity paradox was a part. The conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance. Atwater knew — as did everyone at *Style*, though by some strange unspoken consensus it was never said aloud — that this was the single great informing conflict of the American psyche. The management of insignificance. It was the great syncretic bond of US monoculture. It was everywhere, at the root of everything — of impatience in long lines, of cheating on taxes, of movements in fashion and music and art, of marketing. In particular, he thought it was alive in the paradoxes of audience. It was the feeling that celebrities were your intimate friends, coupled with the inchoate awareness that untold millions of people felt the same way — and that the

celebrities themselves did not. Atwater had had contact with a certain number of celebrities (there was no way to avoid it at a BSG), and they were not, in his experience, very friendly or considerate people. Which made sense when one considered that celebrities were not actually functioning as real people at all, but as something more like symbols of themselves.

There had been eye contact between the journalist and Amber Moltke this whole time, and by now Atwater could also look down, as it were, to see the complex whorls and parts in the young wife's hair and the numerous clips and plastic clamps that were buried in its lustrous mass. There was still the occasional ping of hail. And it was also the world altering pain of accepting one's individual flaws and limitations and the tautological unattainability of our dreams and the dim indifference in the eyes of the circulation intern one tries, at the stroke of the true millennium, to share one's ambivalence and pain with. Most of these latter considerations occurred during a brief diversion from the exchange's main thread into something having to do with professional sewing and tatting and customized alterations, which evidently was what Amber did out of her home to help supplement her husband's income from TriCounty Roto Rooter: 'There's not a fiber swatch or pattern in this world I cannot work with, that's another gift it pleased God to bestow and I'm thankful, it's restful and creative and keeps me out of trouble, these hands are not ever idle' — she holding up for one moment an actual hand, which could likely have gone all the way around Atwater's head and still been able to touch finger to thumb.

Skip Atwater's one and only serious involvement ever had been with a medical illustrator for the Anatomical Monograph Company, which was located off the Pendleton Pike just outside Indianapolis proper, specializing in intricate exploded views of the human brain and upper spine, as well as in lower order ganglia for neurological comparison. She had been only 5'0", and toward the relationship's end Atwater hadn't cared one bit for the way she had looked at him when he undressed or got out of the shower. One evening he'd taken her to a Ruth's Chris and had almost a hallucination or out of body experience in which he'd viewed himself écorché style from her imagined perspective as he

ate, his jaw muscles working redly and esophagus contracting to move bits of bolus down. Only days later had come the shattering performance review from the *Star's* assistant city editor, and Skip's life had changed forever.

→

Early Tuesday morning was the second time ever that Laurel Manderley had ascended to the executive offices of *Style* magazine, which required getting out and transferring to a whole different elevator at the 70th floor. By prior arrangement, Ellen Bactrian had gone up first and verified that the coast was clear. The sun was barely up yet. Laurel Manderley was alone in the elevator, wearing dark wool slacks, very plain Chinese slippers, and a matte black Issey Miyake shirt that was actually made of paper but looked more like some type of very fine opaque tulle. She looked pale and a little unwell; she was not wearing her facial stud. Through some principle of physics she didn't understand, the box in her arms felt slightly heavier when the elevator was in motion. Its total weight was only a few pounds at most. Apparently Ellen Bactrian's commuting routine with the executive intern was a purely informal one whereby they always met up at some certain spot just north of the Holland Tunnel to bike down together, but if either one wasn't at the spot at the designated time, the other just rode on ahead. The whole thing was very laid back. The interior of the first elevator was brushed steel; the one up from 70 had inlaid paneling and a console with tiny directories next to each floor's button. The entire trip took over five minutes, although the elevators themselves were so fast that some of the executive staff wore special earplugs for the rapid ascent.

Her only other time up had been with two other new interns and the WITW associate editor, as part of general orientation, and in the elevator the associate editor had put his arms up over his head and made his hands sharp like a diver's and said: 'Up, up, and away.'

←

Ever since he was a little boy, a deep perfusive flush to Atwater's ears and surrounding tissues was the chief outward sign that his mind was

working to process disparate thoughts and impressions much faster than its normal rate. At these times one could actually feel heat coming off the ear itself, which may have accounted for the rapid self-fanning motions that the immense, creamily etiolated seamstress made as she came back on topic and shared the following personal experience. The daytime television celebrity Phillip Spaulding of *Guiding Light* had, at some past point that Amber didn't specify, made a live promotional appearance at the opening of a Famous Barr store at Richmond's Galleria Mall, and she and a girlfriend had gone to see him, and Amber said she had realized then that her deepest and most life-informing wish, she realized, was to someday have strangers feel about her mere appearance someplace the way she had felt, inside, about getting to stand near enough to Phillip Spaulding (who was evidently a serious hottie indeed, despite something strange or strangely formed about the cartilage of his nose so that it looked like the tip almost had a little dimple or cleft like you'd more normally see on a human chin, which Amber and her girlfriend had decided they ultimately found cute, and made Phillip Spaulding even more of a hottie because it made him look more like a real human being instead of the almost too perfect mannequins these serials sometimes thought folks wanted to see all the time) to reach out between all the other people there and actually touch him if she'd wanted to.

Skip Atwater, in the course of an involved argument with himself later about whether he had more accurately *engaged in* or *been subject to* an act of fraternization with a journalistic subject, would identify this moment as the crucial fulcrum or tipping point of the whole exchange. Already tremendously keyed up and abstracted by Mrs. Moltke's confidences, he found himself nearly overcome by the ingenuous populism of the Phillip Spaulding anecdote, and wished to activate his tiny tape recorder and, if Amber wouldn't repeat the vignette, to at least get her to allow him to repeat and record its gist on tape, along with the date and approximate time — not that he would ever use it for this or any other piece, but just for his own record of a completely perfect representative statement of what it was like to be one of the people to and for whom he wished his work in *Style* to try to speak,

as something to help provide objective dignification of his work and to so to speak hold up shieldlike against the voices in his head that mocked him and said all he really did was write fluff pieces for a magazine most people read in the bathroom. What happened was that Atwater's attempts to subtly work his fingers under Amber's right hand and pry the hand up off the tape recorder on his knee were, in retrospect, evidently interpreted as an attempt at handholding or some other kind of physical affection, and apparently had a profound effect on Mrs. Moltke, for it was then that she brought her great head all the way around between Atwater's face and the steering wheel, and they were kissing — or rather Atwater was kissing at the left corner of Amber Moltke's lip, while her mouth covered nearly the entire right side of the journalist's face all the way to the earlobe. The fluttering motions of his hands as they beat ineffectually at her left shoulder were no doubt similarly misperceived as passion. The movements of Amber's rapid disrobing then began to cause the rented sedan to heave this way and that, and drove its starboard side even more deeply into the overlook's mud, and a very muffled set of what could have been either screams or cries of excitement began to issue from the tilted vehicle; and anyone trying to look in either side's window would have been unable to see any part of Skip Atwater at all.

4.

In New York it starts out as a puzzling marginal entry, 411 on Dish, 105 on Metro Cable. Viewers find it difficult to tell whether it's supposed to be commercial or Community Access or what. At first it's just montages of well known photos involving anguish or pain: a caved in Jackie next to LBJ as he's sworn in on the plane, that agonized Vietcong with the pistol to his head, the naked kids running from napalm. There's something about seeing them one right after another. A woman trying to bathe her thalidomide baby, faces through the wire at Belsen, Oswald crumpled around Ruby's fist, a noosed man as the mob begins to hoist, Brazilians on the ledge of a burning highrise. A loop

of 1,200 of these, four seconds per, running 5:00 PM–1:00 AM EST; no sound; no evident ads.

A venture capital subsidiary of Televisio Brasilia underwrites The Suffering Channel's startup, but you cannot tell that, watching, at first. The only credits are photo ©s and a complicated glyph for O Verily Productions. After a few weeks, stage one TSC also streams on the Web at OVP.com\suff.-vide. The legalities of the video are more tortuous, and it takes almost twice as long as projected for TSC stage two, in which the still photo series is gradually replaced by video clips in a complex loop that expands by four to five new segments per day, depending. Still in the planning phase, TSC stage three is tentatively scheduled for experimental insertion during autumn '01 Sweeps, although, as is SOP with creative enterprises everywhere, there's always flexibility and room to maneuver built in.

Like nearly all members of the paid press, Skip Atwater watched a good deal of satellite TV, much of it marginal or late night, and knew the O Verily glyph quite well. He still had contacts among R. Vaughn Corliss's support staff because of the All Ads All The Time Channel piece, which O Verily had ended up regarding as a fortuitous part of its second wave marketing. The AAATC was still up and pulling in a solid cable share, although response to the insertion of real paid ads within the stream of artifact ads had not had the dynamic impact on revenues that O Verily's prospectus had promised it very well might. Like many viewers, Atwater had been able to tell almost immediately which ads in the loops were paid spots and which were aesthetic objects, and regarded them accordingly, sometimes zapping out the paid ads altogether. And while the differences between an ad as entertainment and an ad that really tried to sell something were fascinating to academics, and had helped to galvanize the whole field of Media Studies in the late 1990s, they did little for the All Ads Channel's profitability. This was one reason why O Verily had had to outsource capitalization for The Suffering Channel, which was in turn why TSC had almost immediately begun positioning itself for acquisition by a major corporation — the Brazilian VCs had required a 24 percent return on a two year window, meaning that O Verily Productions

would retain only nominal creative control if its revenues did not reach a certain floor, which R. Vaughn Corliss had never, from the very start, had any intention of allowing to occur.

In Chicago, O Verily Productions operated out of north side facilities just a few blocks down Addison from WGN's great uplink tower, past which landmark Skip Atwater's rented Cavalier yawed and squeaked — pulling severely to the right from a bent transaxle that had worn one tire nearly bald on the trip up Interstate 65, and with the driver's side door bowed dramatically out from inside as if from some horrific series of impacts, about which neither Hertz Inc. nor *Style's* Accounting staff would be pleased at all — on 2 July at 10:10 AM, nearly two hours late, because it had turned out that any highway speed over 45 mph produced a sound like a great deal of loose change rattling around inside the vehicle's engine.

As of June '01, The Suffering Channel was in the late stages of acquisition by AOL Time Warner, which was itself in Wall Street freefall and involved in talks with Eckleschafft-Böd over a putative merger that would in reality constitute E-Böd white knighting AOL TW against hostile takeover from a consortium of interests led by MCI Premium. The Suffering Channel's specs were thus already in the Eckleschafft-Böd pipeline, and it had required less than an hour of email finagling for Laurel Manderley to acquire certain variably relevant portions of them on behalf of her salaryman.

↓

Subj: **Re: Confidential**
 Date: 8/24/01 10:31:37 AM Eastern Daylight Time
 Content-Type: text/html; charset = us-ascii
 From: k_böttger@ecklbdus.com
 To: l_manderle@stylebsmag.com
 <!DOCTYPE html PRIV "-//W2C//DTD HTML 3.01 Transitional//EN">
 Totalp CT: 6
 Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7bit
 Descramble-Content Reference: 122-XXX-ldvM32XX
 <head>
 <title><title>

<head>

Confidential

Product: The Suffering Channel

Type: Reality/Gaper

Desc. of Product: Real life still and moving images of most intense available moments of human anguish

Production Lic.: O Verily Productions, Chicago and Waukegan, Ill

FCC Lic. Var. Status: [see Attachments, below]

Current Distribution: Regional/test through Dish (Chlc., NYC), Dillard Cable (NE, SE grid), *Video Sodalvo* (Braz), Webstream at OVP.com/suff.~yd

Proposed Distribution: National via TWC Premium Options package (est. 2002), TWC and AOL key = SUFFERCH

Proposed Carryable Rate: Subsc. = \$0.95 monthly stack on TWC Premium Options (= 1.2% increase) w/ prorate 22.5% per subscr. mo. 1-12. Variable projected prorate from Arbitron/Hale subsc Sweeps thereafter (standard) (Note: tracks MCI Premium's Adult Film Channel rate variance per prorate — see attached AFC spreadsheet from MCI source SS2-B4, below)

Bkg on O Verily Prod: CEO & Creative Executive, V. Corliss, 41, b. Gurnee, Ill, BA, Emerson College, MBA & JD, Pepperdine Univ. 3 yrs assoc producer, Dick Clark Prod./NBC, *TV's Bloopers & Practical Jokes*. 3 yrs line producer, Television Program Enterprises, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Runaway with the Rich and Famous*. 3 yrs exec prod., O.V.P., *Surprise Wedding! I-III*, *Shocking Moments In Couples Counseling! I-II*, 2.5 years exec producer, All Ads All The Time Channel [see Attachments, below]

Current O.V.P. Assets, Including Capital Equipment and Receivables: [See Attached LLC filing and spreadsheets, below] (Note: At counsel re photo and video permissions, releases [see USCC/F §212, vi-xiii in Attachments]:

Reudenthal and Voss, P.C., Chicago and NY [see Attachments]

Precis of Sample Tape, 2-21-01 [Enclosure, acquisition specs Attached].

Contents:

- (1) Low light security video, mothers of two children, aged 7 and 9, with late stage cancer, Blue Springs Memorial Hospital Palliative Care Unit, Independence, Mo.
- (2) High light security video, 10 year old male owner (dog); elderly male owner (dog), adult female owner (cats) on Free Euthanasia Day, Maddox Co. Humane Society, Maddox, Ga.
- (3) High light instructional video, 50 year old male coming abruptly awake on table during abdominal surgery, requires physical restraint. Audio quality very high. Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Mass.

- (4a) Handheld video, electroshock Interrogation of adolescent male subject, *Chambre d'Interrogation*, Cloutier Prison, Cameroon (subtitles).
- (4b) Appended low light video (quality poor), video clip (4a) is shown to subject's relatives (pres. parents?), one of whom is revealed as real subject of the Interrogation (subtitles, facial closeups digitally enhanced).
- (5) Covert (?) low light video, Catholic Outreach Services support group for families of victims of murder/violent crime, San Luis Obispo, Cal [rights pending, see Attachments].
- (6) High light legal liability video, stage 4 root canal and crown procedure for 46 year old female allergic to all anesthetics, Off. Dahood Chaterjee DDS, East Stroudsburg, Penn.
- (7) Unused BBC2 shoulder mount video clip of *Necklace Party*, Transvaal Civil Province C7, Pretoria, South Afr (audio excellent).
- (8) Handheld video, middle aged Rwandan (?) couple murdered by group w/ agric. Implements (no audio, facial closeups digitally enhanced).
- (9) Handheld video, shark attack and attempts at resuscitation on 18(?) year old surfer, Stinson Beach, Cal [rights pending, see Attachments].
- (10) High light videotaped suicide note and handgun suicide of 60 year old patent attorney, Rutherford, NJ.
- (11) High light legal liability video, Intake and assessment interview of 28 year old suicidal female, Newton Wellesley Hospital, Newton, Mass.
- (12) Low light security video, parents identify remains of 13 year old raped/dec. child, Emerson County Coroner's Office, Brentley, Tx.
- (13) Webcam digital video, gang rape in dormitory room of 22 year old female designing real time *My Life Web Site* for college course, Lambuth University, Jackson, Tenn (video quality/FPS poor, high gain audio excellent, some faces digitally obscured [see Attachments]).
- (14) High light security video, change of dressing for 3rd degree female (?) burn patient, Josephthal Memorial Hospital Burns Unit, Lawrence, Kan.
- (15) Unused Deutsch 2DF shoulder mount video clip of Cholera Dispensary, Chang Hua Earthquake Zone, PRC.

2-01 Arbitron Rate for 1st Loop Serial Broadcast: 6.2 ± .6

2-01 Arbitron Rate for 2nd Loop Serial Broadcast: 21.0 ± .6

... and so forth.

↓

Ellen Bactrian had them out and arranged on Mrs. Anger's desk when the executive intern came in carrying her bicycle at 7:10. Three of the pieces were upright, one more base intensive and kind of spread out. Each sat on its own blank sheet of typing paper; it was the 20 pound rag bond used for executive letters and memos at *Style*. The pieces were in no particular order. The two editorial interns were in matching chairs in the room's two far corners. Ellen Bactrian had short dark blond hair and an arc of studs along the rim of one ear that every so often caught the light just right and flashed. On the wall near the office door, a large photorealist portrait depicted Mrs. Anger in a glove tight Saint Laurent suit and what almost looked like the kind of Capezio pumps professional dancers wore.

The executive intern, who had been student body president at both Choate and Vassar, always wore form fitting bike shorts for the commute and then changed in the executive lounge. It was another sign of her overall favor and influence that Mrs. Anger let her store the bicycle in her office, which locked. The executive intern's arrival that morning was ever so slightly late, because the SE2 issue had finally closed the previous day. Mrs. Anger herself rarely rolled in much before 9:30.

The executive intern stood there still holding her bike, which weighed only eight and a half pounds, and staring at the pieces while the smile she'd come in with emptied out. She was acknowledged as more or less defining the standard of excellence for interns at *Style*. At least 5'10" in flats, with long auburn tresses that shone in even the meanest fluorescence, she managed to seem at once worldly and ethereal, and moved through the corridors and semiattached cubicles of the magazine like a living refutation of everything Marx ever stood for.

'We decided you needed to see them,' Ellen Bactrian said, 'before anybody said anything to anybody one way or the other.'

'Great glittering God.' The executive intern's front teeth emerged and pressed lightly on her lower lip. She had unconsciously assumed

the same position that Skip Atwater and Ellen Bactrian and many of the patrons of the soybean festivals and fair had — standing several feet away, her posture somewhat S shaped because of the twin impulses to approach and recoil. She had on a brain shaped helmet and a Vassar sweatshirt with the collar and cuffs removed and the white flocking of the interior allowed to show. Her athletic shoes had special attachments that evidently clipped to the racing bike's pedals. The shadow she cast back against the wall was complex and distended.

'Are they something?' Laurel Manderley said quietly. She and Ellen Bactrian had brought in some additional lamps from the conference room next door because something about the overhead lights hit the fixative wrong and produced glare. Each of the pieces was fully and evenly lit. The executive office area was much quieter and more dignified than the sixteenth floor, but also a bit cool and stiff, Laurel thought.

The executive intern still held the bicycle. 'You didn't actually . . . ?'

'They're sort of laminated. Don't worry.' Laurel Manderley had applied the additional fixative herself per instructions relayed through Skip Atwater, who was even then boarding a commuter flight to Muncie out of Midway. Laurel Manderley, who had also handled the whole rental car exchange unpleasantness, knew his timetable to the minute. She had declined the optional thing with the Saran, though. She felt like she might literally faint at any time.

'So was I jerking you off, or what?' Ellen Bactrian asked the executive intern.

Laurel Manderley made a little ta da gesture: 'It's the miraculous poo.'

One of her bicycle's wheels still idly turned, but the executive intern's eyes had not once moved. She said: 'Something isn't even the word.'

↓

Established fact: Almost no adult remembers the details or psychic fallout of her own toilet training. By the time one might have cause to want to know, it has been so long that you have to try asking your parents — which rarely works, because most parents will deny not only recollection but even original involvement in anything having to do

with your toilet training. Such denials are basic psychological protection, since parenting can sometimes be a nasty business. All these phenomena have been exhaustively researched and documented.

R. Vaughn Corliss's most tightly held secret vision or dream, dating from when he was just beginning to detach from Leach and TPE and to conceive of reinventing himself as a force in high concept cable: a channel devoted wholly to images of celebrities shitting. Reese Witherspoon shitting. Juliette Lewis shitting. Michael Jordan shitting. Longtime House Minority Whip Dick Gephardt shitting. Pamela Anderson shitting. George F. Will, with his bow tie and prunny mouth, shitting. Former PGA legend Hale Irwin shitting. Stones bassist Ron Wood shitting. Pope John Paul shitting as special attendants hold his robes' hems up off the floor. Leonard Maltin, Annette Bening, Michael Flatley, either or both of the Olsen twins, shitting. And so on. Helen Hunt. *The Price Is Right's* Bob Barker. Tom Cruise. Jane Pauley. Talia Shire. Yasser Arafat, Timothy McVeigh, Michael J. Fox. Former HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros. The idea of real time footage of Martha Stewart perched shitting amid the soaps and sachets and color coordinated linens of her Connecticut estate's master bathroom was so powerful that Corliss rarely allowed himself to imagine it. It was not a soporific conceit. It was also, obviously, private. Tom Clancy, Margaret Atwood, bell hooks. Dr. James Dobson. Beleaguered IL Governor George Ryan. Peter Jennings. Oprah. He told no one of this dream. Nor of his corollary vision of the images beamed into space, digitally sequenced for maximum range and coherence, and of advanced alien species studying this footage in order to learn almost everything necessary about planet earth circa 2001.

He wasn't a madman; it could never fly. Still, though. There was Reality TV, which Corliss himself had helped lay the ground floor of, and the nascent trend toward absorbing celebrities into the matrix of violation and exposure that was Reality: celebrity bloopers, celebrities showing you around their homes, celebrity boxing, celebrity political colloquy, celebrity blind dating, celebrity couples counseling. Even serving time at Leach's TPE, Corliss could see that the logic of such programming was airtight and led inexorably to the ultimate exposures:

celebrity major surgical procedures, celebrity death, celebrity autopsy. It only seemed absurd from outside the logic. How far along the final arc would Slo Mo High Def Full Sound Celebrity Defecation be? How soon before the idea ceased being too loony to mention aloud, to float as a balloon before the laughing heads of Development and Legal? Not yet, but not never. They'd laughed at Murdoch in Perth, once, Corliss knew.

Laurel Manderley was the youngest of four children, and her toilet training, which commenced around 30 months, had been casual and ad hoc and basically no big deal. The Atwater brothers' own had been early, brutal, and immensely effective — it was actually during toilet training that the elder twin had first learned to pump his left fist in self exhortation.

Little Roland Corliss, whose nanny was an exponent of a small and unapologetically radical splinter of the Waldorf educational movement, had experienced no formal toilet training at all, but rather just the abrupt unexplained withdrawal of all diapers at age four. This was the same age at which he had entered Holy Calvary Lutheran Preschool, where unambiguous social consequences motivated him to learn almost immediately what toilets were for and how to use them, rather like the child who is rowed way out and then taught to swim the old fashioned way.

↓

BSG is magazine industry shorthand for the niche comprising *People*, *Us*, *In Style*, *In Touch*, *Style*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. (For demographic reasons, *Teen People* is not usually included among the BSGs.) The abbreviation stands for big soft glossy, with soft in turn meaning the very most demotic kind of human interest.

As of July 2001, three of the six major BSGs are owned by Eckleschafft-Böd Medien A.G., a German conglomerate that controls nearly 40 percent of all US trade publishing.

Like the rest of the mainstream magazine industry, each of the BSG weeklies subscribes to an online service that compiles and organizes all contracted stringers' submissions to both national wires and Gannett,

of which submissions roughly 8 percent ever actually run in the major news dailies. A select company of editorial interns, known sometimes as shades because of the special anodized goggles required by OSHA for intensive screen time, is tasked to peruse this service.

Skip Atwater, who was one of the rare and old school BSG journalists who actually pitched pieces as well as receiving assignments, was also one of the few paid staffers at *Style* who bothered to review the online service for himself. As a practical matter, he did so only when he was not in the field, and then usually at night, after his dogs had again gone to sleep, sitting up in his Ball State Cardinals cap with a glass of ale and operating his home desktop according to instructions which Laurel Manderley's predecessor had configured as a special template that fit along the top of the unit's keyboard. An AP stringer out of Indianapolis, filing from the Franklin County Fair on what was alleged to be the second largest Monte Cristo sandwich ever assembled, had included a curio about displays of extremely intricate and high class figurines made out of what the stringer had spelled fasces. The objets d'art themselves were not described — they had been arrayed in glass cases that were difficult to get near because of the crowds around them, and people's hands and exhalations had apparently smeared the glass so badly that even when you did finally shoulder your way up close the interiors were half obscured. Later, Skip Atwater would learn that these slanted glass cabinets were acquired from the tax sale of a failed delicatessen in Greensburg IN, which for decades had had a small and anomalous Hasidic community.

It was a word padding aside in a throwaway item unflagged by any of *Style*'s shades, and from his own native experience Atwater was disposed to assume that the things were probably crude little Elvises or Earnhardts made of livestock waste . . . except the display banner's allegedly quoted *Hands Free Art Crafts* caught his eye. The phrase appeared to make no sense unless automation were involved, which, as applied to livestock waste, would be curious indeed. Curiosity, of course, being more or less Skip Atwater's oeuvre with regard to WHAT IN THE WORLD. Not curiosity as in tabloid or freakshow, or rather all right sometimes borderline freakshow but with an upbeat thrust. The

content and tone of all BSGs were dictated by market research and codified down to the smallest detail: celebrity profiles, entertainment news, hot trends, and human interest, with human interest representing a gamut in which the occasional freakshow item had a niche — but the rhetoric was tricky. BSGs were at pains to distinguish themselves from the tabloids, whose target market was wholly different. *Style's* WTRW items were people centered and always had to be both credible and uplifting, or latterly there at least had to be ancillary elements that were uplifting and got thumped hard.

Atwater could thump with the best. And he was old school and energetic: he ran down two or three possible WTRW stories for every one that got written, and pitched things, and could rewrite other men's copy if asked to. The politics of rewrites could get sticky, and interns often had to mediate between the salarymen involved, but Atwater was known around *Style's* editorial offices as someone who could both rewrite and get rewritten without being an asshole about it. At root, his reputation with staffers and interns alike was based in this: his consistent failure to be an asshole. Which could, of course, be a double edged sword. He was seen as having roughly the self esteem of a prawn. Some at *Style* found him fussy or pretentious. Others questioned his spontaneity. Sometimes the phrase queer duck was used. There was the whole awkward issue of his monotone wardrobe. The fact that he actually carried pictures of his dogs in his wallet was either endearing or creepy, depending whom you asked. A few of the sharper interns intuited that he'd had to overcome a great deal in himself in order to get this far.

He knew just what he was: a professional soft news journalist. We all make our adjustments, hence the term well adjusted. A babyfaced bantam with ears about which he'd been savagely teased as a boy — Jughead, Spock, Little Pitcher. A polished, shallow, earnest, productive, consummate corporate pro. Over the past three years, Skip Atwater had turned in some 70 separate pieces to *Style*, of which almost 50 saw print and a handful of others ran under rewriters' names. A volunteer fire company in suburban Tulsa where you had to be a grandmother to join. When Baby Won't Wait — Moms who never made it to the hospital

tell their amazing stories. Drinking and boating: The other DUI. Just who really *was* Slim Whitman. This Grass Ain't Blue — Kentucky's other cash crop. He Delivers — 81 year old obstetrician welcomes the grandchild of his own first patient. Former Condit intern speaks out. Today's forest ranger: He doesn't just sit in a tower. Holy Rollers — Inline skateathon saves church from default. Eczema: The silent epidemic. Rock 'n' Roll High School — Which future pop stars made the grade? Nevada bikers rev up the fight against myasthenia gravis. Head of the Parade — From Macy's to the Tournament of Roses, this float designer has done them all. The All Ads All The Time cable channel. Rock of Ages — These geologists celebrate the millennium in a whole new way. Sometimes he felt that if not for his schipperkes' love he would simply blow away and dissipate like milkweed. The women who didn't get picked for *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*: Where did they come from, to what do they return. Leapin' Lizards — The Gulf Coast's new alligator plague. One Lucky Bunch of Cats — A terminally ill Lotto winner's astounding bequest. Those new home cottage cheese makers: Marvel or ripoff? Be(-Happy-)Attitudes — This Orange County pastor claims Christ was no sourpuss. Dramamine and NASA: The untold story. Secret documents reveal Wallis Simpson cheated on Edward VIII. A Whole Lotta Dough — Delaware teen sells \$40,000 worth of Girl Scout cookies . . . and isn't finished yet! For these former agoraphobics, home is not where the heart is. Contra: The thinking person's square dance.

At the same time, it was acknowledged that Atwater's best had sometimes been those pieces he ran down himself and pitched, items that often pushed the BSG envelope. For 7 March '99, Atwater had submitted the longest WTRW piece ever done for *Style*, on the case of a U. Maryland professor murdered in his apartment where the only witness was the man's African gray parrot, and all the parrot would repeat was 'Oh God, no, please no' and then gruesome noises, and on the veterinary hypnotist that the authorities had had working with the parrot to see what more they could get out of it. The UBA here had been the hypnotist and her bio and beliefs about animal consciousness, the central tensions being was she just a New Age loon along the lines of

Beverly Hills pet therapists or was there really something to it, and if the parrot was hypnotizable as advertised and sang then what would be its evidentiary status in court.

Very early every morning of childhood, Mrs. Atwater's way of waking her two boys up was to stand between their beds and clap her hands loudly together, not stopping until their feet actually touched the bedroom floor, which now floated in the depths of Virgil Atwater's memory as a kind of sardonic ovation. Hopping Mad — This triple amputee isn't taking health care costs lying down. The meth lab next door! Mrs. Gladys Hine, the voice behind over 1,500 automated phone menus. The Dish — This Washington D.C. caterer has seen it all. Computer solitaire: The last addiction? No Sweet Talkin' — Blue M&Ms have these consumers up in arms. Dallas commuter's airbag nightmare. Menopause and herbs: Exciting new findings. Fat Chance — Lottery cheaters and the heavyweight squad that busts them. Seance secrets of online medium Duwayne Evans. Ice sculpture: How do they *do* that?

Atwater's best regarded piece ever so far, 3 July '00: A little girl in Upland CA had been born with an unpronounceable neurological condition whereby she could not form facial expressions, normal and healthy in every way with blond pigtailed and a corgi named Skipper except her face was a flat staring granite mask, and the parents were starting a foundation for the incredibly over 5,000 other people worldwide who couldn't form normal facial expressions, and Atwater had run down, pitched, and landed 2,500 words for a piece only half of which was back matter, plus another two columns' worth of multiple photos of the girl reclined expressionless in her mother's lap, stony and staring under raised arms on a roller coaster, and so forth. Atwater had finally gotten the go ahead from the bimannual associate editor on the Suffering Channel piece because he'd done the '99 writw fluffer on the All Ads All The Time Channel, which was also O Verily, and could truthfully posit a rapport with R. Vaughn Corliss, whose eccentric recluse persona formed a neat human hook — although the associate editor had said that where Atwater was ever going to find the UBA in

the TSC story was anyone's guess and would stretch Atwater's skill set to the limit.

5.

The first of the dreams Laurel Manderley found so disturbing had occurred the same night that the digital photos of Brint Moltke's work had appeared on the floor below the fax and she had felt the queer twin impulses both to bend and get them and to run as fast as she could from the cubicle complex. An ominous vatic feeling had persisted throughout the rest of the evening, which was doubly unsettling to Laurel Manderley, because she normally believed about as much in intuition and the uncanny as US Vice President Dick Cheney did.

She lay late at night in the loft, her bunkmate encased in Kiehl's cream beneath her. The dream involved a small house that she somehow knew was the one with the fractional address that belonged to the lady and her husband in Skip Atwater's miraculous poo story. They were all in there, in the like living room or den, sitting there and either not doing anything or not doing anything Laurel Manderley could identify. The creepiness of the dream was akin to the fear she'd sometimes felt in her maternal grandparents' summer home in Lyford Cay, which had certain closet doors that opened by themselves whenever Laurel was in the room. It wasn't clear what Mr. and Mrs. Moltke looked like, or wore, or what they were saying, and at one point there was a dog standing in the middle of the room but its breed and even color were unclear. There was nothing overtly surreal or menacing in the scene. It seemed more like something generic or vague or tentative, like an abstract or outline. The only specifically strange thing was that the house had two front doors, even though one of them wasn't in the front but it was still a front door. But this fact could not begin to account for the overwhelming sense of dread Laurel Manderley felt, sitting there. There was a premonition of not just danger but evil. There was a creeping, ambient evil present, except even though present it was not in the room. Like the second front door, it was somehow

both there and not. She couldn't wait to get out, she had to get out. But when she stood up with the excuse of asking to use the bathroom, even in the midst of asking she couldn't stand the feeling of evil and began running for the door in stocking feet in order to get out, but it was not the front door she ran for, it was the other door, even though she didn't know where it was, except she must know because there it was, with a decorative and terribly detailed metal scarab over the knob, and whatever the overwhelming evil was was right behind it, the door, but for some reason even as she's overcome with fear she's also reaching for the doorknob, she's going to open it, she can see herself starting to open it — and that's when she wakes. And then almost the totally exact same thing happens the next night, and she's afraid now that if she has it again then the next time she'll actually open the front door that isn't in front . . . and her fear of this possibility is the only thing she can put her finger on in trying to describe the dream to Siobhan and Tara on the train ride home Tuesday night, but there's no way to convey just why the two front door thing is so terrifying, since she herself can't even rationally explain it.

↓

The Moltkes were childless, but their home's bathroom lay off a narrow hallway whose east wall was hung with framed photos of Brint and Amber's friends' and relatives' children, as well as certain shots of the Moltkes themselves as youngsters. The presence in this hallway of Atwater, a freelance photographer who wore a Hawaiian shirt and smelled strongly of hair cream, and a Richmond IN internist whom Ellen Bactrian had personally found and engaged had already disarranged some of the photos, which now hung at haphazard angles and revealed partial cracks and an odd set of bulges in the wall's surface. There was one quite extraordinary shot of Amber at what had to have been her wedding's reception, radiant in white brocade and holding the cake's tiered platform in one hand while with the other she brought the cutter to bear. And what at first glance had looked like someone else was a Little League photo of Moltke himself, in uniform

and holding an aluminum bat, the artist perhaps nine or ten and his batting helmet far too large. And so on.

Atwater's new rental car, a pointedly budget Kia that even he felt cramped in, sat in the Moltke's driveway with the MD's Lincoln Brougham just behind it. Moltke's company van was parked in the duplex's other driveway, which bespoke some kind of possible arrangement with the other side's occupant that Atwater, who felt more than a little battered, and conflicted and ill at ease in Mrs. Moltke's presence, had not yet thought to inquire about. The artist's wife had objected strenuously to a procedure that she said both she and her husband found distasteful and degrading, and was now in her sewing room off the kitchen, whence the occasional impact of her foot on an old machine's treadle shook the hallway and caused the freelance photographer to have to readjust his light stands several different times.

The internist appeared to stand frozen in the gesture of a man looking at his watch. The photographer, for whom Atwater had had to wait over three hours in the Delaware County Airport, sat Indian style in a litter of equipment, picking at the carpet's nap like a doleful child. A large and very precise French curl of hair was plastered to the man's forehead with Brylcreem, whose scent was another of Skip Atwater's childhood associations, and he knew it was the heat of the arc lights that made the hair cream smell so strong. The journalist's left knee now ached no matter which way he distributed his weight. Every so often he pumped his fist at his side, but it was in a tentative and uninspired way.

In the wake of a slow moving front, the area's air was clear and dry and the sky a great cobalt expanse and Tuesday's overall weather both hot and almost autumnally crisp.

The Moltkes' home's bathroom door, a fiberboard model with interior hinges, was shut and locked. From its other side issued the sound of the sink and tub's faucets intermixed with snatches of conservative talk radio. Her husband was an intensely private and skittish bathroom individual, Mrs. Moltke had explained to the MD and photographer, due without doubt to certain abuses he'd suffered as a tiny child. Negotiations over the terms of authentication had taken place in

the home's kitchen, and she had laid all this out with Mr. Moltke sitting right there beside her — Atwater had watched the man's hands instead of his face while Amber declaimed about her husband's bathroom habits and childhood trauma. Today she wore a great faded denim smock thing and seemed to loom in the periphery of Atwater's sight no matter where he looked, rather like the sky when one's outside.

At one point in the negotiations, Atwater had needed to use the bathroom and had gone in there and seen it. He really had had to go; it had not been a pretense. The Moltkes' toilet was in a small *de facto* alcove formed by the sink's counter and the wall that comprised the door jamb. The room smelled exquisitely of mildew. He could see that the wall behind the sink and toilet was part of the same east load bearer that ran along the hallway and sitting room and conjoined the duplex's other side. Atwater preferred a bathroom whose facilities were a bit farther from the door, for privacy's sake, but he could see that the only way to accomplish this here would have been to place the shower unit where the toilet now was, which given this shower's unusual size would be impossible. It was difficult to imagine Amber Moltke backing herself into this slender recess and settling carefully on the white oval seat to eliminate. Since the east wall also held the interior plumbing for all three of the room's fixtures, it stood to reason that the bathroom on the other side of the duplex abutted this one, and that its own plumbing also lay within the wall. For a moment, nothing but an ingrained sense of propriety kept Atwater from trying to press his ear to the wall next to the medicine cabinet to see whether he could hear anything. Nor would he ever have allowed himself to open the Moltkes' medicine cabinet, or to root in any serious way through the woodgrain shelves above the towel rack.

The toilet itself was a generic American Standard, its white slightly brighter than the room's walls and tile. The only noteworthy details were a large crack of some sort on the unpadded seat's left side and a rather sluggish flushing action. The toilet and area of floor around it appeared very clean. Atwater was also the sort of person who always made sure to put the seat back down when he was finished.

Evidently, Ellen Bactrian's brain trust had decided against present-

ing a short list of specific works or types of pieces they wanted the artist to choose from. The initial pitch that Laurel Manderley had been directed to instruct Atwater to make was that both the MD and photographer would be set up in there with Brint Moltke while he produced whatever piece he felt moved on this day to create. As predicted, Amber declared this totally unacceptable. The proffered compromise, then, was the presence of just the MD (which in fact was all they'd wanted in the first place, *Style* having no possible use for in medias photos). Mrs. Moltke, however, had nixed this as well — Brint had never produced an artwork with anyone else in the room. He was, she iterated once more, an incorrigibly private bathroom person.

During the parts of her presentation he'd already heard, the journalist noted in Gregg shorthand that the home's kitchen was carpeted and deployed a green and burgundy color scheme in its walls, counters, and cabinets, that Mrs. Amber Moltke must almost certainly have had some type of school or community theater experience, and that the broad plastic cup from which the artist had occasionally sipped coffee was from the top of a Thermos unit that was not itself in evidence. Of these observations, only the second had any bearing on the piece that would eventually run in *Style* magazine's final issue.

What had especially impressed Ellen Bactrian was Laurel Manderley's original suggestion that Skip pick up a portable fax machine at some Circuit City or Wal Mart on the way down from Muncie with the photographer — whose equipment had required the subcompact's seats to be moved forward as far as they would go, and who not only smoked in the nonsmoking rental but had this thing where he then fieldstripped each cigarette butt and put the remains carefully in the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt — and that the unit be hooked up to the Moltkes' kitchen phone, which had a clip outlet and could be switched back and forth from phone to fax with no problem. This allowed the MD, whose negotiated station was finally fixed at just outside the bathroom door, to receive the piece fresh ('hot off the griddle' had been the photographer's phrase, which had caused the circle of Moltke's digital mudra to quiver and distend for just a moment), to perform his immediate field tests, and to fax the findings directly to

Laurel Manderley, signed and affixed with the same medical authorization number required by certain prescriptions.

'You understand that *Style* is going to have to have some corroboration,' Atwater had said. This was at the height of the ersatz negotiations in the Moltkes' kitchen. He chose not to remind Amber that this entire issue had already been hashed out in the enmired Cavalier two days prior. It's not a matter of whether the magazine trusts you or not. It's that some readers are obviously going to be skeptical. *Style* cannot afford to look overcredulous or like a dupe to even a fraction of its readers.' He did not, in the kitchen, refer to the BSGs' concern with distinguishing themselves from tabloids, though he did say: 'They can't afford to let this look like a tabloid story.'

Both Amber Moltke and the photographer had been eating pieces of a national brand coffee cake that could evidently be heated in the microwave without becoming runny or damp. Her forkwork was deft and delicate and her face as broad across as two of Skip's own placed somehow side by side.

'Maybe we should just go on and let some tabloid do it, then,' she had replied coolly.

Atwater said: 'Well, should you decide to do that, then yes, credibility ceases to be an issue. The story gets inserted between Delta Burke's all fruit diet and reports of Elvis's profile in a photo of Neptune. But no other outlet picks up the story or follows it up. Tabloid pieces don't enter the mainstream.' He said: 'It's a delicate balance of privacy and exposure for you and Brint, I'm aware. You'll obviously have to make your own decision.'

Later, waiting in the narrow and redolent hallway, Atwater noted in Gregg that at some point he and Amber had ceased even pretending to include the artist in the kitchen's whole back and forth charade. And that the way his damaged knee really felt was this: ignominious.

↓

'Or here's one,' Laurel Manderley said. She was standing next to the trayless fax machine, and the editorial intern who had regaled the pre-

vious day's working lunch with the intracunnilingual flatus vignette was seated at the other WTRW salaryman's console a few feet away. Today the editorial intern — whose first name also happened to be Laurel, and who was a particularly close friend and protégé of Ellen Bactrian — wore a Gaultier skirt and a sleeveless turtleneck of very soft looking ash gray cashmere.

'Your own saliva,' said Laurel Manderley. 'You're swallowing it all the time. Is it disgusting to you? No. But now imagine gradually filling up a juice glass or something with your own saliva, and then drinking it all down.'

'That really is disgusting,' the editorial intern admitted.

'But why? When it's in your mouth it's not gross, but the minute it's outside of your mouth and you consider putting it back in, it becomes gross.'

'Are you suggesting it's somehow the same thing with poo?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. I think with poo, it's more like as long as it's inside us we don't think about it. In a way, poo only becomes poo when it's excreted. Until then, it's more like a part of you, like your inner organs.'

'It's maybe the same way we don't think about our organs, our livers and intestines. They're inside all of us —'

'They *are* us. Who can live without intestines?'

'But we still don't want to see them. If we see them, they're automatically disgusting.'

Laurel Manderley kept touching at the side of her nose, which felt naked and somewhat creepily smooth. She also had the kind of sick headache where it hurt to move her eyes, and whenever she moved her eyes she could not help but seem to feel all the complex musculature connecting her eyeballs to her brain, which made her feel even woozier. She said: 'But partly we don't like seeing them because if they're visible, that means there's something wrong, there's a hole or some kind of damage.'

'But we also don't even want to think about them,' the other Laurel said. 'Who sits there and goes, Now the salad I ate an hour ago is

entering my intestines, now my intestines are pulsing and squeezing and moving the material along?'

'Our hearts pulse and squeeze, and we don't mind thinking about our heart.'

'But we don't want to see it. We don't even want to see our blood. We faint dead away.'

'Not menstrual blood, though.'

'True. I was thinking more of like a blood test, seeing the blood in the tube. Or getting a cut and seeing the blood come out.'

'Menstrual blood is disgusting, but it doesn't make you lightheaded,' Laurel Manderley said almost to herself, her large forehead crinkled with thought. Her hands felt as though they were shaking even though she knew no one else could see it.

'Maybe menstrual blood is ultimately more like poo. It's a waste thing, and disgusting, but it's not wrong that it's all of a sudden outside of you and visible, because the whole point is that it's supposed to get out, it's something you want to get rid of.'

'Or here's one,' Laurel Manderley said. 'Your skin isn't disgusting to you, right?'

'Sometimes my skin's pretty disgusting.'

'That's not what I mean.'

The other editorial intern laughed. 'I know. I was just kidding.'

'Skin's outside of us,' Laurel Manderley continued. 'We see it all the time and there's no problem. It's even aesthetic sometimes, as in so and so's got beautiful skin. But now imagine, say, a foot square section of human skin, just sitting there on a table.'

'Eww.'

'Suddenly it becomes disgusting. What's *that* about?'

The editorial intern recrossed her legs. The ankles above her sling-back Jimmy Choos were maybe ever so slightly on the thick side, but she had on the sort of incredibly fine and lovely silk hose that you're lucky to be able to wear even once without totally ruining them. She said: 'Maybe again because it implies some kind of injury or violence.'

The fax's incoming light still had not lit. 'It seems more like the skin is decontextualized.' Laurel Manderley felt along the side of her nos-

tril again. 'You decontextualize it and take it off the human body and suddenly it's disgusting.'

'I don't even like thinking about it, to be honest.'

↓

'I'm just telling you I don't like it.'

'Between you and I, I'd say I'm starting to agree. But it's out of our hands now, as they say.'

'You're saying you'd maybe prefer it if I hadn't gone to Miss Flick with them,' Laurel Manderley said on the telephone. It was late Tuesday afternoon. At certain times, she and Atwater used the name Miss Flick as a private code term for Ellen Bactrian.

'There was no other way to pitch it, I know. I know that,' Skip Atwater responded. 'Whatever's to blame is not that. You did what I think I would have asked you to do myself if I'd had my wits about me.' Laurel Manderley could hear the whispery whisk of his waist level fist. He said: 'Whatever culpability is mine,' which did not make that much sense to her. 'Somewhere some core part of it got past me on this one, I think.'

The *Style* journalist had been seated on the bed's edge on a spread out towel, checking the status of his injured knee. In the privacy of his motel room, Atwater was sans blazer and the knot of his necktie was loosened. The room's television was on, but it was tuned to the Spectravision base channel where the same fragment of song played over and over and the recorded voice of someone who was not Mrs. Gladys Hine welcomed you to the Mount Carmel Holiday Inn and invited you to press Menu in order to see options for movies, games, and a wide variety of in room entertainment, over and over; and Atwater had evidently misplaced the remote control (which in Holiday Inns tends to be very small) required for changing the channel or at the very least muting it. The left leg of his slacks was rolled neatly up to a point above the knee, every second fold reversed to prevent creasing. The television was a nineteen inch Symphonic on a swiveling base that was attached to the blondwood dresser unit facing the bed. It was the same second floor room he had checked into on Sunday — Laurel

Manderley had somehow gotten Accounting to book the room straight through even though Atwater had spent the previous night in a Courtyard by Marriott on Chicago's near north side, for which motel the freelance photographer was even now bound, at double his normal daily rate, in preparation for tomorrow's combined coverage spectacle.

On the wall above the room's television was a large framed print of someone's idea of a circus clown's face and head constructed wholly out of vegetables. The eyes were olives and the lips peppers and the cheeks' spots of color small tomatoes, for example. Repeatedly, on both Sunday and today, Atwater had imagined some occupant of the room suffering a stroke or incapacitating fall and having to lie on the floor looking up at the painting and listening to the base channel's nine second message over and over, unable to move or cry out or look away. In some respects, Atwater's various tics and habitual gestures were designed to physicalize his consciousness and to keep him from morbid abstractions like this — he wasn't going to have a stroke, he wouldn't have to look at the painting or listen to the idiot tune over and over until a maid came in the next morning and found him.

'Because that's the only reason. I thought you knew she'd sent them.'

'And if I'd called in on time as I should have, we'd both have known and there would have been no chance of misunderstanding.'

'That's nice, but it's not really my point,' Laurel Manderley said. She was seated at Atwater's console, absently snapping and unsnapping a calfskin barrette. As was SOP with Skip and his interns, this telephone conversation was neither rapid nor clipped. It was shortly before 3:30 and 4:30 respectively, since Indiana does not adhere to the DST convention. Laurel Manderley would later tell Skip that she had been so tired and unwell on Tuesday that she'd felt almost translucent, and plus was upset that she would have to come in on the Fourth, tomorrow, in order to mediate between Atwater and Ellen Bactrian re the so called artist's appearance on The Suffering Channel's inaugural tableau vivant thing, all of which had been literally thrown together in hours. It was not the way either of them normally worked.

Nor had *Style* ever before sought to conjoin two different pieces in process. It was this that signified to Skip Atwater that either Mrs.

Anger or one of her apparatchiks had taken a direct hand. That he felt no discernible trace of either vindication or resentment about this was perhaps to his credit. What he did feel, suddenly and emphatically in the midst of the call, was that he might well be working for Laurel Manderley someday, that it would be she to whom he pitched pieces and pleaded for additional column inches.

For Laurel Manderley's own part, what she later realized she had been trying to do in the Tuesday afternoon telephone confab was to communicate her unease about the miraculous poo story without referring to her dream of spatial distortion and creeping evil in the Moltke couple's home. In the professional world, one does not invoke dreams in order to express reservations about an ongoing project. It just doesn't happen.

Skip Atwater said: 'Well, she did have my card. I gave her my card, of course. But not our Fed Ex number. You know I'd never do that.'

'But think — they got here Monday morning. Yesterday was Monday.'

'She spared no expense.'

'Skip,' Laurel Manderley said. 'Fed Ex isn't open on Sunday.'

The whisking sound stopped. 'Shit,' Atwater said.

'And I didn't even call them for the initial interview until almost Saturday night.'

'And Fed Ex isn't apt to be open Saturday night, either.'

'So the whole thing is just very creepy. So maybe you need to ask Mrs. Moltke what's going on.'

'You're saying she must have sent the pieces before you'd even called.' Atwater was not processing verbal information at his usual rate. One thing he was sure of was that he now had absolutely zero intention of telling Laurel Manderley about the potentially unethical fraternization in the Cavalier, which was also why he could say nothing to her of the whole knee issue.

A person who tended to have very little conscious recall of his own dreams, Atwater today could remember only the previous two nights' sensation of being somehow immersed in another human being, of having that person surround him like water or air. It did not exactly

take an advanced clinical degree to interpret this dream. At most, Skip Atwater's mother had been only three fifths to two thirds the size of Amber Moltke, although if you considered Mrs. Atwater's size as it would appear to a small child, much of the disparity then vanished.

After the telephone conversation, seated there on the bed's protective towel, one of the other things that kept popping unbidden into Atwater's mind was the peculiar little unconscious signifier that Brint Moltke made when he sat, the strange abdominal circle or hole that he formed with his hands. He'd made the sign again today, in the home's kitchen, and Atwater could tell it was something Mr. Brint Moltke did a lot — it was in the way he sat, the way all of us have certain little trademark styles of gesturing when we speak or arranging various parts of our bodies when seated. In what he felt was his current state, Atwater's mind seemed able only to return to the image of the gesture again and again; he could get no further with it. In a similar vein, every time he had made a shorthand note to himself to inquire about the other side of the Moltkes' duplex, he would then promptly forget it. His stenographer's notebook later turned out to include a half dozen such notations. The clown's teeth were multicolored kernels of what Atwater's folks had called Indian corn, its hair a spherical nimbus of corn chaff, which happened to be the single most allergenic substance known to man. And yet at the same time the hands' circle seemed also a kind of signal, something that the artist perhaps wished to communicate to Atwater but didn't know how or was not even fully aware he wished to. The strange blank fixed smile was a different matter — it too was unsettling, but the journalist never felt that it might be trying to signify anything beyond itself.

Atwater had never before received any kind of sexual injury. The discoloration was chiefly along the leg's outside, but the swelling involved the kneecap, and this was clearly what was causing the real pain. The area of bruising extended from just below the knee to the lower thigh; certain features of the car door's armrest and window's controls were directly imprinted in the bruise's center and already yellowing. The knee had felt constricted in his slacks' left leg all day. It gave off a radioactive ache and was sensitive to even the lightest con-

tact. Atwater examined it, breathing through his teeth. He felt the distinctive blend of repulsion and fascination nearly all people feel when examining a diseased or injured part of themselves. He also had the feeling that the knee now somehow existed in a more solid and emphatic way than the rest of him around it. It was something like the way he used to feel at the mirror in the bathroom as a boy, examining his protuberant ears from all different angles. The room was on the Holiday Inn's second level and opened onto an exterior balcony that overlooked the pool; the cement stairs up had also hurt the knee. He couldn't straighten his leg out all the way. In the afternoon light, his calf and foot appeared pale and extremely hairy, perhaps abnormally hairy. There were also spatial issues. He had allowed it to occur to him that the bruising was actually trapped blood leaking from injured blood vessels under the skin, and that the changes in color were signs of the trapped blood decomposing under the skin and of the human body's attempts to deal with the decaying blood, and as a natural result he felt lightheaded and insubstantial and ill.

He was not so much injured as sore and more or less pummeled feeling elsewhere, as well.

Another childhood legacy: When anything painful or unpleasant happened to his body, Skip Atwater often got the queer sense that he was in fact not a body that occupied space but rather just a bodyshaped area of space itself, impenetrable but empty, with a certain vacuous roaring sensation we tend to associate with empty space. The whole thing was very private and difficult to describe, although Atwater had had a long and interesting off the record conversation about it with the Oregon multiple amputee who'd organized a series of high profile anti HMO events in 1999. It also now occurred to him for the first time that 'gone in the stomach,' which was a regional term for nausea he'd grown up with and then jettisoned after college, turned out to be a much more acute, concise descriptor than all the polysyllables he and the one legged activist had hurled at one another over the whole interior spatial displacement epiphenomenon.

There was something essentially soul killing about the print of the vegetable head clown that had made Atwater want to turn it to the

wall, but it was bolted or glued and could not be moved. It was really on there, and Atwater now was trying to consider whether hanging a bath towel or something over it would or would not perhaps serve to draw emotional attention to the print and make it an even more oppressive part of the room for anyone who already knew what was under the towel. Whether the painting was worse actually seen or merely, so to speak, alluded to. Standing angled at the bathroom's exterior sink and mirror unit, it occurred to him that these were just the sorts of overabstract thoughts that occupied his mind in motels, instead of the arguably much more urgent and concrete problem of finding the television's remote control. For some reason, the controls on the TV itself were inactive, meaning that the remote was the only way to change channels or mute the volume or even turn the machine off, since the relevant plug and outlet were too far behind the dresser to reach and the dresser unit, like the excruciating print, was bolted to the wall and could not be budged. There was a low knocking at the door, which Atwater did not hear over the repetitive tune and message because he was at the sink with the water running. Nor could he remember for certain whether it was heat or cold that was effective for swelling after almost 48 hours, though it was common knowledge that ice was what was indicated directly after. What he eventually decided was to prepare both a hot and a cold compress, and to alternate them, his left fist moving in self exhortation as he tried to recall his childhood scouting manual's protocol for contusions.

The second level's ice machine roared without cease in a large utility closet next to Atwater's room. His tie reknotted but the left leg of his slacks still rolled way up, the journalist had the Holiday Inn's distinctive lightweight ice bucket in his hand when he opened the door and stepped out into the ambient noise and chlorine smell of the balcony. His shoe nearly came down in the message before he saw it and stopped, one foot suspended in air, aware at the same time that chlorine was not the only scent in the balcony's wind. The "*HELP ME*" was ornate and calligraphic, quotation marks sic. In overall design, it was not unlike the cursive *HAPPY BIRTHDAY VIRGIL AND ROB, YMSP2 '00*, and other phrases of decorative icing on certain par-

ties' cakes of his experience. But it was not made of icing. That much was immediately, emphatically clear.

Holding the bucket, his ears crimson and partly denuded leg still raised, the journalist was paralyzed by the twin urges to examine the message's workmanship more closely and to get far away as quickly as possible, perhaps even to check out altogether. He knew that great force of will would be required to try to imagine the various postures and contractions involved in producing the phrase, its detached and plumb straight underscoring, the tiny and perfectly formed quotation marks. Part of him was aware that it had not yet occurred to him to consider what the phrase might actually mean or imply in this context. In a sense, the content of the message was obliterated by the overwhelming fact of its medium and implied mode of production. The phrase terminated neatly at the second E's serif; there was no tailing off or spotting.

A faint human sound made Atwater look hard right — an older couple in golfing visors stood some yards off outside their door, looking at him and the balcony's brown cri de coeur. The wife's expression pretty much said it all.

←

All salarymen, staff, and upper level interns at *Style* had free corporate memberships to the large fitness center located on the second underground level of the WTC's South Tower. The only expense was a monthly locker fee, which was well worth it if you didn't want to schlep a separate set of exercise clothing along with you to the offices every day. Two of the facility's walls were lined with mirrored plate. There were no windows, but the center's cardio fitness area was replete with raised banks of television monitors whose high gain audios could be accessed with ordinary Walkman headphones, and the channels could be changed via touchpad controls that were right there on the consoles of all the machines except the stationary bicycles, which themselves were somewhat crude and used mainly for spinning classes, which were also offered gratis.

At midday on Tuesday 3 July, Ellen Bactrian and Mrs. Anger's

executive intern were on two of the elliptical training machines along the fitness center's north wall. Ellen Bactrian wore a dark gray Fila unitard with Reebok crosstrainers. There was a neoprene brace on her right knee, but it was mostly prophylactic, the legacy of a soccer injury at Wellesley three seasons past. Multicolored fairy lights on the machines' sides spelled out the brand name of the elliptical trainers. The executive intern, in the same ensemble she'd worn for biking in to the *Style* offices that morning, had programmed her machine to the same medium level of difficulty as Ellen Bactrian's, as a kind of courtesy.

It being the lunch hour, the center's cardio fitness area was almost fully occupied. Every elliptical trainer was in use, though only a few of the interns were using headsets. The nearby StairMasters were used almost exclusively by midlevel financial analysts, all of whom had bristly cybernetic haircuts. Not for over 40 years had the crewcut and variations upon it been so popular; a SURFACES item on the phenom was not long in the offing.

Certain parts of a four way internal email exchange Tuesday morning had concerned what specified type(s) of piece the magazine should require the Indianan to produce under tightly controlled circumstances in order to verify that his abilities were not a hoax or some tasteless case of idiot savantism. The fourth member of this exchange had been the photo intern whose mammoth engagement ring at Tutti Mangia had occasioned so much cattiness during yesterday's SE2 closing. Some of the specs proposed for the authenticity test were: A 0.5 reproduction of the Academy Awards' well known Oscar statuette, G. W. F. Hegel's image of Napoleon as the world spirit on horseback, a WWII Pershing tank with rotating turret, any coherently identifiable detail from Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*, a buck with a twelve point rack, either the upper or lower portion of the ancient Etruscan *Mars of Todi*, and the well known tableau of several US Marines planting the flag on an Iwo Jima atoll. The idea of any sort of Crucifixion or *Pietà* type piece was flamed the moment it was proposed. Although Skip Atwater had not yet been given his specific marching orders, Mrs. Anger's executive intern and Ellen Bactrian were both currently leaning toward a representation of the famous photograph in which Marilyn Monroe's

skirts are blown upward by some type of vent in the sidewalk and the expression on her face is, to say the least, intimately familiar to readers of *Style*.

Some of the internal email exchange's topics and arguments had carried over into various different lunchtime colloquies and brainstorming sessions, including the present one in the World Trade Center's corporate fitness facility, which proceeded more or less naturally because an axiom of elliptical cardio conditioning is that your target heartrate and respiration are to stay just at the upper limit of what allows for normal conversation.

'But is the physical, so to speak handmade character of a piece of art part of the artwork's overall quality?'

That is, in elliptical training you want your breathing to be deep and rapid but not labored — Ellen Bactrian's rhetorical question took only a tiny bit longer to get out than a normal, at rest rhetorical question.

The executive intern responded: 'Do we all really value a painting more than a photograph anymore?'

'Let's say we do.'

The executive intern laughed. 'That's almost a textbook petition principii.' She actually pronounced principii correctly, which almost no one can do.

'A great painting certainly sells for more than a great photograph, doesn't it?'

The executive intern was silent for several broad quadular movements of the elliptical trainer. Then she said: 'Why not just say rather that *Style*'s readership would not have a problem with the assumption that a good painting or sculpture is intrinsically better, more human and meaningful, than a good photo.'

Often, editorial brainstorming sounds like an argument, but it isn't — it's two or more people thinking aloud in a directed way. Mrs. Anger herself sometimes referred to the brainstorming process as dilution, but this was a vestige of her Fleet Street background, and no one on her staff aped the phrase.

A woman about their mothers' age was exhibiting near perfect

technique on a rowing machine in the mirror, mouthing the words to what Ellen Bactrian thought she recognized as a Venetian bacarole. The other rowing machine was vacant. Ellen Bactrian said: 'But now, if we agree the human element's key, then does the physical process or processes by which the painting is produced, or any artwork, have anything to do with the artwork's quality?'

'By quality you're still referring to how good it is.'

It is difficult to shrug on an elliptical trainer. 'Good quote unquote.'

'Then the answer again is that what we're interested in is human interest, not some abstract aesthetic value.'

'And yet isn't the point that they're not mutually exclusive? How about all Picasso's affairs, or the thing with van Gogh's ear?'

'Yes, but van Gogh didn't paint with his ear.'

By habit, Ellen Bactrian avoided looking directly at their side by side reflections in the mirrored wall. The executive intern was at least three inches taller than she. The sounds of all the young men's legs working the StairMasters were at certain points syncopated, then not, then gradually syncopated again. The two editorial interns' movements on the elliptical trainers, on the other hand, appeared synchronized down to the smallest detail. Each of them had a bottle of water with a sports cap in her elliptical trainer's special receptacle, although they were not the same brands of bottled water. The fitness center's sonic environment was basically one large, complex, and rhythmic pneumatic clank.

Between breaths, an ever so slightly peevish or impatient tone entered Ellen Bactrian's voice: 'Then, say, the *My Left Foot* guy who painted with his left foot.'

'Or the idiot savant who can reproduce Chopin after one hearing,' the executive intern said. This was an indirect bit of massaging on her part, since there had been a WTRW profile of just such an idiot savant in an issue the previous summer — the piece's UBA was that the retarded man's mother had battled heroically to keep him out of an institution.

Under the diffused high lumen lights of the cardio fitness area, the executive intern's quads and delts seemed like something out of an advertisement. Ellen Bactrian was fit and attractive, with a perfectly

respectable body fat percentage, but around the executive intern she often felt squat and dumpy. An unhealthy part of her sometimes suspected that the executive intern liked exercising with her because it made her, the executive intern, feel comparatively even more willowy and scintillant and buff. What neither Ellen Bactrian nor anyone else at *Style* knew was that the executive intern had had a dark period in preparatory school during which she'd made scores of tiny cuts in the tender skin of her upper arms' insides and then squeezed reconstituted lemon juice into the cuts as penance for a long list of personal shortcomings, a list she had tracked daily in her journal in a special numerical key code that was totally unbreakable unless you knew exactly which page of *The Bell Jar* the code's numbers were keyed to. Those days were now behind her, but they were still part of who the executive intern was.

'Yes,' Ellen Bactrian said, 'although, although I'm no art critic, Skip's guy's pieces are also artworks of surpassing quality and value in their own right.'

'Although of course all the readers will get to see is photos —'

Maybe. Both interns laughed briefly. The issue of publishable photos had been one they'd all agreed that morning to table — there were, as the WTRW associate editor sometimes liked to quip, bigger fish on the front burner.

Ellen Bactrian said: 'Although remember that even photos, if Amine's to be believed, if absolutely properly lit and detailed so that —'

'Except hold on, answer this — does this person have to actually be *familiar* with something to represent it the way he does?'

Both women were at a node of their computerized workout and were breathing almost heavily now. Amine Tadić was *Style* magazine's associate photo editor; her head intern had served as her proxy in the morning's email confab.

Ellen Bactrian said: 'What do you mean?'

'According to Laurel, this is a person with maybe like a year or two of community college. How on earth would he know Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, or what Anubis's head looks like?'

'Or for that matter which side the Liberty Bell's crack's on.'

'I sure didn't know it.'

Ellen Bactrian laughed. 'Laurel did. Or she said she did — obviously she could have looked it up.' Ellen Bactrian was also, on her own time, trying to learn how to type completely different things with each hand, à la the WHAT IN THE WORLD section's associate editor, for whom she had certain feelings that she knew perfectly well were SOP transference for an intelligent, ambitious woman her age, since the associate editor was both seductive and a textbook authority figure. Ellen Bactrian liked the associate editor's wife quite a lot, actually, and so took great pains to keep the whole bimanual thing in perspective.

The executive intern was able to reach down and hydrate without breaking rhythm, which on an elliptical trainer takes a great deal of practice. 'I'm saying: Does the man have to see or know something in order to represent it? Produce it? Let's say that if he does and it's all totally conscious and intentional, then he's a real artist.'

'But if he doesn't —'

'Which is why the unlikeliness of a Roto Rooter guy from Nowhere Indiana knowing futurism or the *Unique Forms* is relevant,' the executive intern said, wiping her forehead with a terry wristband.

'If he doesn't, it's some kind of, what, a miracle? Idiot savantry? Divine intervention?'

'Or else some kind of extremely sick fraud.'

Fraud was a frightening word to them both, for obvious reasons. One consequence of getting Mrs. Anger's executive intern in on the miraculous poo story was that Eckleschafft-Böd US's Legal people were now involved and devoting resources to the piece in a way that Laurel Manderley and Ellen Bactrian could never have caused, even given the WTRW associate editor's own background in Legal. BSG weeklies rarely broke stories or covered anything that other media hadn't already premasticated. The prospect was both exciting and frightful.

The executive intern said: 'Or else maybe it's subconscious. Maybe his colon somehow knows things his conscious mind doesn't.'

'Is it the colon that determines the whole shape and configuration and everything of the . . . you know?'

The executive intern made a face. 'I don't know. I don't really want to think about it.'

'What is the colon, anyhow? Is it part of the intestines or is it technically its own organ?'

Ellen Bactrian's and the executive intern's fathers were both MDs in Westchester County NY, though the two men practiced different medical specialties and had never met. The executive intern periodically reversed the direction of her elliptical trainer's pedals, working her quadriceps and calves instead of the hamstrings and lower gluteals. Her facial expression throughout these periods of reversal was both intent and abstracted.

'Either way,' Ellen Bactrian said, 'it's obviously human interest right out the wazoo.' She then related the anecdote that Laurel Manderley had shared with her in the elevators on the way back down from the 82nd floor early that morning, about the DKNY clad circulation intern at lunch telling everybody that she sometimes pretended her waste was a baby and then expecting them to relate or to think her candor was somehow hip or brave.

For a moment there was nothing but the sound of two syncopated elliptical trainers. Then the executive intern said: 'There's a way to do this.' She blotted momentarily at her upper lip with the inside of her wristband. 'Joan would say we've been thinking about this all wrong. We've been thinking about the subject of the piece instead of the angle for the piece.' Joan referred to Mrs. Anger, the Executive Editor of *Style*.

'The UBA's been a problem from the start,' Ellen Bactrian said. 'What I told —'

The executive intern interrupted: 'There doesn't have to be a strict UBA, though, because we can take the piece out of WHAT IN THE WORLD and do it in SOCIETY PAGES. Is the miraculous poo phenomenon art, or miracle, or just disgusting.' She seemed not to be aware that her limbs' forward speed had increased; she was now forcing her workout's

program instead of following it. SOCIETY PAGES was the section of *Style* devoted to soft coverage of social issues such as postnatal depression and the rain forest. According to the magazine's editorial template, SP items ran up to 600 words as opposed to WTRW's 400.

Ellen Bactrian said: 'Meaning we include some bites from credible sources who think it is disgusting. We have Skip create controversy in the piece itself.' It was true that her use of Atwater's name in the remark was somewhat strategic — there were complex turf issues involved in altering a piece's venue within the magazine, and Ellen Bactrian could well imagine the WTRW associate editor's facial expression and some of the cynical jokes he might make in order to mask his hurt at being shut out of the story altogether.

'No,' the executive intern responded. 'Not quite. We don't create the controversy, we cover it.' She was checking her sports watch even though there were digital clocks right there on the machines' consoles. Both women had met or exceeded their target heart rate for over half an hour.

A short time later, they were in the little tiled area where people towed off after a shower. At this time of day, the locker room was steamy and extremely crowded. The executive intern looked like something out of Norse mythology. The hundreds of tiny parallel scars on the insides of her upper arms were all but invisible. It is a fact of life that certain people are corrosive to others' self esteem simply as a function of who and what they are. The executive intern was saying: 'The real angle is about coverage. *Style* is not foisting a gross or potentially offensive story on its readers. Rather, *Style* is doing soft coverage on a controversial story that already exists.'

Ellen Bactrian had two towels, one of which she had wrapped around her head in an immense lavender turban. 'So Atwater will just rotate over and do it for SOCIETY PAGES, you're saying? Or will Genevieve want to send in her own salaryman?' Genevieve was the given name of the new associate editor in charge of SOCIETY PAGES, with whom Ellen Bactrian's overman had already locked horns several times in editorial meetings.

The executive intern had inclined her head over to the side and was

combing out a shower related tangle with her fingers. As was something of an unconscious habit, she bit gently at her lower lip in concentration. 'I'm like ninety percent sure this is the way to go,' she said. '*Style* is covering the human element of a controversy that's already raging.' At this point, they were at their rented lockers, which, in contradistinction to those on the men's side, were full length in order to facilitate hanging. Painstakingly modified with portable inset shelving and adhesive hooks, both the women's locker units were small marvels of organization.

Ellen Bactrian said: 'Meaning it will need to be done somewhere else first. SOCIETY PAGES covers the coverage and the controversy.' She favored Gaultier pinstripe slacks and sleeveless cashmere tops that could be worn either solo or under a jacket. So long as the slacks and top were in the same color family, sleeveless could still be all business — Mrs. Anger had taught them all that.

In what appeared to be another unconscious habit, the executive intern sometimes actually pressed the heel of her hand into her forehead when she was thinking especially hard. In a way, it was her version of Skip Atwater's capital flush. The opinion of nearly all the magazine's other interns was that the executive intern was operating on a level where she didn't have to be concerned about things like color families or maintaining a cool professional demeanor.

'But it can't be too big,' she said.

'The piece, or the venue?' Ellen Bactrian always had to pat the ear with all the studs in it dry with a disposable little antibiotic cloth.

'We don't want *Style* readers to already know the story. This is the tricky part. We want them to feel as if *Style* is their first exposure to a story whose existence still precedes their seeing it.'

'In a media sense, you mean.'

The executive intern's skirt was made of several dozen men's neckties all stitched together lengthwise in a complicated way. She and a Mauritanian exchange student in THE THUMB who wore hallucinatorily colored tribal garb were the only two interns at *Style* who could get away with this sort of thing. It was actually the executive intern, at a working lunch two summers past, who had originally compared Skip

Atwater to a jockey who'd broken training, though she had said it in a light and almost affectionate way — coming from her, it had not sounded cruel. Over Memorial Day weekend, she had actually been a guest of Mrs. Anger at her summer home in Quogue, where she had reportedly played mahjongg with none other than Mrs. Hans G. Bød. Her future seemed literally without limit.

'Yes, though again, it's delicate,' the executive intern said. 'Think of it as not unlike the Bush daughters, or that thing last Christmas on Dodi's driver.' These were rough analogies, but they did convey to Ellen Bactrian the executive intern's basic thrust. In a broad sense, the cover the extant story angle was one of the standard ways BSGs distinguished themselves from both hard news glossies and the tabloids. On another level, Ellen Bactrian was also being informed that the overall piece was still her and the WHAT IN THE WORLD associate editor's baby; and the executive intern's repeated use of terms like tricky and delicate was designed both to flatter Ellen Bactrian and to apprise her that her editorial skill set would be amply tested by the challenges ahead.

Gaultier slacks held their crease a great deal better if your hanger had clips and they could hang from the cuffs. The voluptuous humidity of the locker room was actually good for the tiny wrinkles that always accumulated through the morning. Unbeknownst to Ellen Bactrian, lower level interns often referred to her and the executive intern in the same hushed and venerative tones. A constant sense that she was insufficient and ever at risk of exposing her incompetence was one of the ways Ellen Bactrian kept her edge. Were she to learn that she, too, was virtually assured of a salaried offer from *Style* at her internship's end, she would literally be unable to process the information — it might well send her over the edge, the executive intern knew. The way the girl now pressed at her forehead in unconscious imitation of the executive intern was a sign of just the kind of core insecurity the executive intern was trying to mitigate by bringing her along slowly and structuring their conversations as brainstorming rather than, for instance, her simply outright telling Ellen Bactrian how the miraculous poo story should be structured so that everyone made out. The executive intern was one of the greatest, most intuitive

nurturers of talent Mrs. Anger had ever seen — and she herself had interned under Katharine Graham, back in the day.

'So it can't be too big,' Ellen Bactrian was saying, first one hand against the locker and then the other as she adjusted her Blahniks' straps. She now spoke in the half dreamy way of classic brainstorming. 'Meaning we don't totally sacrifice the scoop element. We need just enough of a prior venue so the story already exists. We're covering a controversy instead of profiling some freakoid whose b.m. comes out in the shape of Anubis's head.' Her hair had almost completely air dried already.

The executive intern's belt for the skirt was two feet of good double hemp nautical rope. Her sandals were Laurent, open toe heels that went with nearly anything. She tied the ankles' straps with half hitches and began to apply just the tiniest bit of clear gloss. Ellen Bactrian had now turned and was looking at her:

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

Their eyes met in the compact's little mirror, and the executive intern smiled coolly. 'Your salaryman's already out there. You said he's shuttling between the two pieces already, no?'

Ellen Bactrian said: 'But is there actual suffering involved?' She was already constructing a mental flow chart of calls to be made and arrangements undertaken and then dividing the overall list between herself and Laurel Manderley, whom she now considered a bit of a pistol.

'Well, listen — can he take orders?'

'Skip? Skip's a consummate pro.'

The executive intern was adjusting the balloon sleeves of her blouse. 'And according to him, the miraculous poo man is skittish on the story?'

'The word Laurel says Skip used was excruciated.'

'Is that even a word?'

'It's apparently totally the wife's show, in terms of publicity. The artist guy is scared of his own shadow — according to Laurel, he's sitting there flashing Skip secret signs like No, please God, no.'

'So how hard could it be to represent this to Atwater's All Ads person as comprising bona fide suffering?'

Ellen Bactrian's mental flow charts often contained actual boxes, Roman numerals, and multiarrow graphics — that's how gifted an administrator she was. 'You're talking about something live, then.'

'With the proviso that of course it's all academic until this afternoon's tests check out.'

'But do we know for sure he'll even go for it?'

The executive intern never brushed her hair after a shower. She just gave her head two or three shakes and let it fall gloriously where it might and turned, slightly, to give Ellen Bactrian the full effect:

'Who?' She had ten weeks to live.

6.

In what everyone at the next day's working lunch would agree was a masterstroke, the special limousine that arrived at 5:00 AM Wednesday to convey the artist and his wife to Chicago was like something out of a *Style* reader's dream. Half a city block long, white the way cruise ships and bridal gowns are white, it had a television and wet bar, opposing seats of cordovan leather, noiseless AC, and a thick glass shield between passenger compartment and driver that could be raised and lowered at the touch of a button on the woodgrain panel, for privacy. To Skip Atwater, it looked like the hearse of the kind of star for whom the whole world stops dead in its tracks to mourn. Inside, the Moltkes faced each other, their knees almost touching, the artist's hands obscured from view by the panels of his new beige sportcoat.

The salaryman's Kia trailing at a respectful distance, the limousine proceeded at dawn through the stolid caucasian poverty of Mount Carmel. There were only faint suggestions of faces behind its windows' darkened glass, but whoever was awake to see the limousine glide by could tell that whoever was in there looking out saw everything afresh, like coming out of a long coma.

↓

O Verily was, understandably, a madhouse. The time from initial pitch to live broadcast was 31 hours. The Suffering Channel would enter

stage three at 8:00 PM CDT on 4 July, ten weeks ahead of schedule, with three tableaux vivant. There were five different line producers, and all of them were very busy indeed.

It was not Sweeps Week; but as the saying goes in cable, every week is Sweeps Week.

A 52 year old grandmother from Round Lake Beach IL had a growth in her pancreas. The needle biopsy w/ CAT assist at Rush Presbyterian would be captured live by a remote crew; so would the activities of the radiology MD and pathologist whose job was to stain the sample and determine whether the growth was malignant. The segment entailed two separate freelance crews, all of whom were IA union and on holiday double time. The second part of the feed would be split screen. In something of a permissions coup, they'd have the woman's face for the whole ten minutes it took for the stain to set and the pathologist to scope it. She and her husband would be looking at a monitor on which the pathology crew's real time feed would be displayed — viewers would get to see the verdict and her reaction to it at the same time.

Finding just the right host for the segments' intros and voiceovers was an immense headache, given that nearly every plausible candidate's agent was off for the Fourth, and that whomever The Suffering Channel cast they were then all but bound to stick with for at least one stage three cycle. Finalists were still being auditioned as late as 3:00 PM — and *Style* magazine's Skip Atwater, in a move whose judgment was later questioned all up and down the editorial line, ended up devoting a good part of his time, attention, and shorthand notes to these auditions, as well as to a lengthy and somewhat meandering Q&A with an assistant to the Reudenthal and Voss associate tasked to the day's multiform permissions and releases.

In 1996, an unemployed arc welder was convicted of abducting and torturing to death a Penn State coed named Carole Ann Deutsch. Over four hours of high quality audiotape had been recovered from the suspect's apartment and entered into evidence at trial. Voiceprint analysis confirmed that the screams and pleadings on the tapes — which were played for the jury, though not in open court — belonged

to the victim. This tableau's venue was a hastily converted OVP conference room. For the first time, Carole Ann Deutsch's widowed father, of Glassport PA, would listen to selections from those tapes. There with him for support are the associate pastor from Mr. Deutsch's church and an APA certified trauma counselor whose sunburn, only hours old, presents some ticklish problems for the segment's makeup coordinator.

Longtime *People's Court* moderator Doug Llewellyn hosts. After lengthy and sometimes heated negotiations — during which at one point Mrs. Anger herself had to be contacted at home and enjoined to speak directly by cell to R. Vaughn Corliss, which Ellen Bactrian later said made her just about want to curl up and die — representatives of both the ACLU and the League of Decency are on hand for brief interviews by Skip Atwater of *Style*.

It is a clear Lucite commode unit atop a ten foot platform of tempered glass beneath which a video crew will record the real time emergence of either an iconically billowing and ecstatic Monroe or a five to seven inch *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, depending on dramatic last minute instructions. Suspended from the studio's lighting grid to a position directly before the commode unit, a special monitor taking feed from below will give the artist visual access to his own production for the first time ever in his career. He believes what he sees will be public.

In point of fact, the piece's physical emergence will not really be broadcast. The combined arguments of *Style*'s Ellen Bactrian and the Development heads of O Verily Productions finally persuaded Mr. Corliss it would be beyond the pale. Instead, the artist's wife has been interviewed on tape respecting Brint Moltke's abusive childhood and the terrific shame, ambivalence, and sheer human suffering involved in his unchosen art. Edited portions of this interview will compose the voiceover as TSC viewers watch the artist's face in the act of creation, its every wince and grimace captured by the special camera hidden within the chassis of the commode's monitor.

A consciência é o pesadelo da natureza.

It is, of course, malignant. Subsequently, though, Carole Ann Deutsch's father discomfits everyone by seeming less interested in the

tapes than in justifying his appearance on the broadcast itself. His purpose for being here is to inform the public of what victims' loved ones go through, to humanize the process and raise awareness. He repeats this several times, but at no point does he share how he feels or what he feels he's gone through just now, listening. In the context of what he and the viewers have just heard, Mr. Deutsch's reaction comes off as almost obscenely abstract and disengaged. On the other hand, Doug Llewellyn's own evident humanity and ad lib skill in getting everyone through the segment testify to the soundness of his casting.

A slow chain pulls the commode assembly up an angled plane until the unit locks into place atop its Lucite pipe. Mrs. Moltke's been allowed in the control room. Virgil 'Skip' Atwater and the Reudenthal and Voss paralegal are back against one wall, out of the arc lights' wash, the journalist's whole face flushed with ibuprofen and hands folded monkishly over his abdomen. At the base of the plane, *Style*'s freelance photographer is down on one knee, going handheld, still in the same Hawaiian shirt. The famously reclusive R. Vaughn Corliss is nowhere in view. Doug Llewellyn's wardrobe furnished by Hugo Boss. The Malina blanket for the artist's lap and thighs, however, is the last minute fix of a production oversight, retrieved from the car of an apprentice gaffer whose child is still nursing, and is not what anyone would call an appropriate color or design, and appears unbilled. There's also some eleventh hour complication involving the ground level camera and the problem of keeping the commode's special monitor out of its upward shot, since video capture of a camera's own monitor causes what is known in the industry as feedback glare — the artist in such a case would see, not his own emergent *Victory*, but a searing and amorphous light.