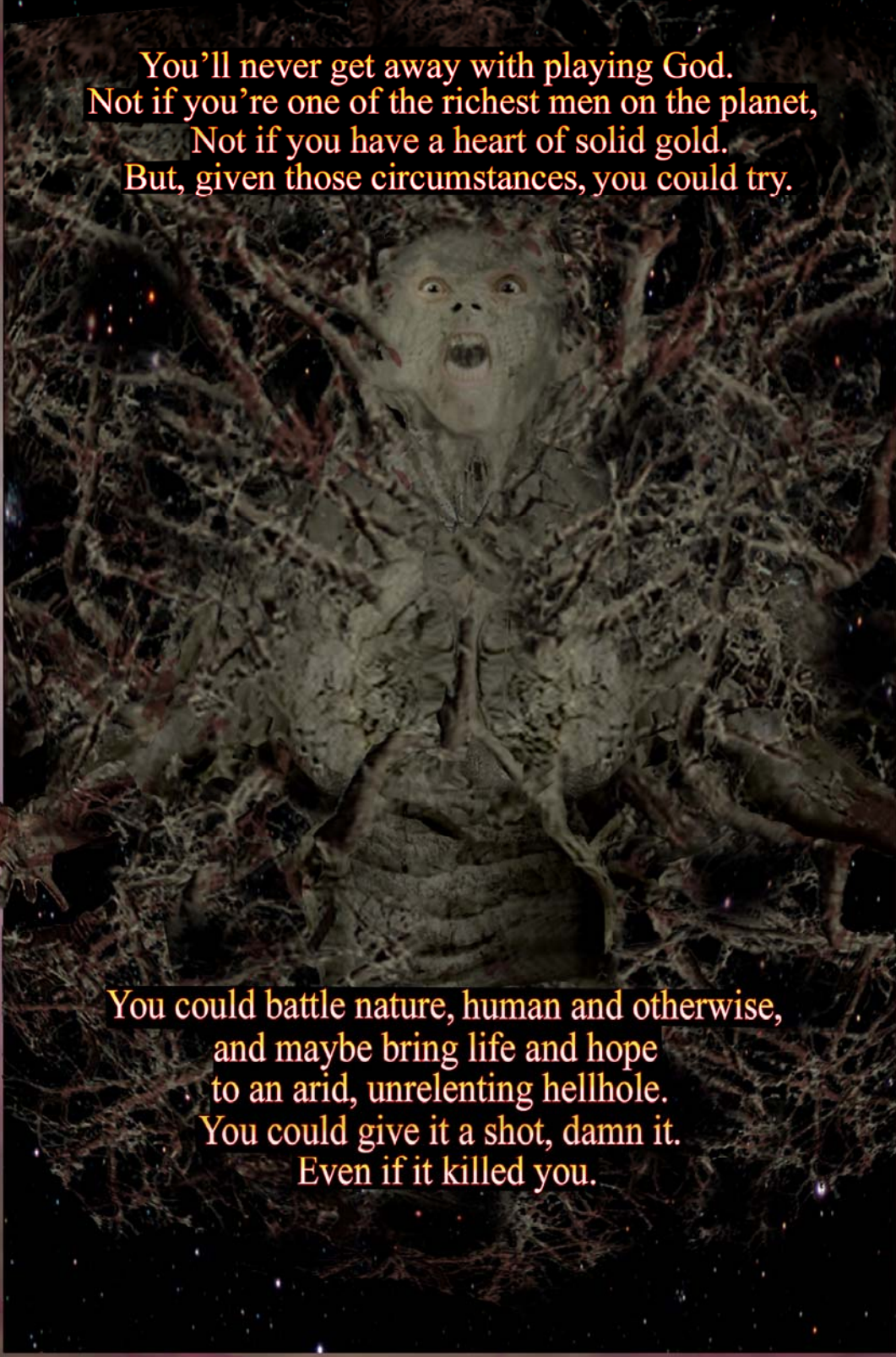


MICROCOSMIA



Ron Sanders



You'll never get away with playing God.
Not if you're one of the richest men on the planet,
Not if you have a heart of solid gold.
But, given those circumstances, you could try.

You could battle nature, human and otherwise,
and maybe bring life and hope
to an arid, unrelenting hellhole.
You could give it a shot, damn it.
Even if it killed you.

Microcosmia

by

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John

Megan

Limo

Christian

Karl

An'erim

Mamuset

Afar

Franco

Khantu

Massawa

Old Harbor

Aseb

Kid

Rebecca

Solomon

Tibor

Worthless

Mudhead

Wildfeather

Chapter One

John

The old man rose through the darkness inch by inch, his fingers wriggling on the cold marble sink like maggots on hot china.

A muted *click*, and a bright pink light was blinking urgently on the bathroom's ceiling. Security's in-house monitors flashed back and forth, phones rang in staggered time. Resuscitation equipment kicked to life. A second later every alarm in the mansion was howling.

Old John stood clinging to the crystal faucet heads, horrified by his own reflection: sunken blue marbles for eyes, wasted nose plugged by dangling tubes, a gummy black gash of a mouth. In the strobelike light his lips writhed in slow motion, his eyes appeared to throb in their caves. Unable to turn away, he watched himself dissolve.

"Kaw," he croaked. The room sank six feet. He tightened his grip and fought for breath. "*Kaw!*" A scarlet froth broke from his nostrils and oozed down the tubes. The left side of his face seized and relaxed. Seized again. His right arm kicked.

"Kawr!" he gasped. "Kawr, Kawr!"

John's body rocked like a newborn foal. A long black drop trickled down his hollow cheek, seeming, in the panting light, to jerk as it rolled. His image swam in and out of focus. He coughed, *hard*. A second later blood was streaming down the backs of his thighs. With all his strength he filled

his crepe paper lungs and cried,

“Karl!”

The big Austrian slipped between the door and jamb without appearing the least flustered, though he'd dropped everything and sprinted the moment he realized John was off his respirator. He calmly killed the alarm with one hand, turned the wall plate's polished nickel knob with the other. An array of cream-colored spears emanated from recessed fixtures in the ceiling and walls. Overhead, a fan's heart-shaped blades began swimming without a whisper, stirring a deep pink pile underfoot.

John staggered back from the sink, fluttering like a lame pigeon. With that same air of casual efficiency, Karl used a pink-on-cream bath towel to plug his master's trembling bottom, simultaneously lifting him free of his bloodied and soiled pajamas.

He lifted him effortlessly.

At one hundred and three, John Beregard Vane weighed a mere sixty-eight pounds, so it was easy as pie for Karl, a former fullback forty years his junior, to scoop him into the Big Bedroom. Karl tenderly placed him on the silk-canopied bed, padded to the ruby-dusted bay window, and mechanically spread the room's black shrouding curtains, all the while speaking as though the old man were a child.

“You are so bad to move, John! This I tell you many times. You must never leave the bed without you call me first. It is no trouble for me to come. But you are such a bad boy to move. What are you thinking? What will I do with you?”

Karl, now washed in bright California sun, crept back to the bed and pulled the cover to Vane's chin. On the ventilator's side-caddy were several bowls of pink roses surrounding a plush stuffed Winnie. Between the bear's splayed knees was a ceramic pot labeled HONEY, and inside this pot rested the room's fire engine-red rotary telephone. Karl pulled up a chair, reached into the pot, and lifted out the receiver.

“Kar,” John moaned, his head lolling on the pillow.

“Doctor be soon, John. This I promise.”

But John's head only rolled harder. In mid-roll the head stopped and faced the ceiling. The rooster neck arched, the tiny Adam's apple shuddered. “Chrisha,” the old man gagged. “Chrisha, Chrisha.”

Karl leaned closer, frowning. “John, this I now insist. Doctor Steinbaum here soon.”

John tossed his head wildly, clutching the cover’s hem and kicking his feet. “Christian,” he gasped. “Christian!”

Karl placed his big palm on John’s brow, lifted a withered eyelid with his thumb. He didn’t waste time on the pulse. He set the receiver on its cradle, immediately picked it back up, and dialed a new number without looking. “Simms! Wake! Find Cristian now! Bring here! And go hurry!” Karl’s pale blue eyes narrowed, his lips working hard as he sought words to explain the situation concisely and with finality. A storm brewing nigh on thirty years was about to break and take everything that mattered with it. He unclenched his toes, steadied his breathing, and pressed his lips against the mouthpiece.

“This,” he hissed, “is it,” and gently replaced the receiver.

Like a bright ballerina on a softly shaken carpet, a golden hump of spume was swept laterally by the tide. Wave by wave the delicate mold progressed, at last dissolving on the sand. Farther along, a new hump was born.

Twenty yards back, a quiet young man was observing this charming process as an event analogous to his own bullied existence. Like all depressives, he believed his personal fate was determined by a particularly cruel tide.

Cristian knew he too was being watched; he could feel it. He didn’t budge, he merely rolled his eyes. A glistening brown woman, wearing only a thong bikini and half a pound of cocoa butter, was studying his profile. Her hair was golden blonde, her bikini the pink of cotton candy. She was flawless.

“I know you,” she mumbled. “Don’t I know you?”

Cristian wagged his head. “I would have remembered. Definitely. Eternally.”

She leaned forward, palms on knees, intuitively going for the cheesecake close-up. “You’re in movies? A sitcom? Now where did I...”

Cristian’s finger shot to his lips and his eyes darted warningly. “Nothing solid yet. But my

agent keeps me hopping. Maybe we met at casting. There're just *so* many pretties."

Perfect hands went to perfect hips. "*Who's* your agent?"

"Ah-ah-ah." He wagged that same finger. "Don't ask, don't tell."

The woman's mouth fell open. Her nose turned up. "As if I need..." She straightened. "Just you...don't you worry!" She took a few steps and whirled. Cristian could read her lips. His cheeks and ears burned. "*Honey...Honey port...Honey pie. I...know you!*" He watched her sashay up to her friends, looking back every other step. The women huddled. Their faces popped up, vanished, reappeared.

It was time to go. Cristian grabbed his gear and tramped across the sand, intermittently peering over his shoulder. The women were now squealing hysterically, their bobble heads grouped behind a sleazy gossip newspaper. He made his way along a lightly-traveled access road below Pacific Coast Highway, cursing all nosy women and their stupid supermarket rags.

Cristian Honey Vane's ill humor, under Southern California's golden therapeutic sun, was as conspicuous, and as incongruous, as his paranoia. He'd never lacked a thing in life. His health was good, his mind sound, his father staggeringly wealthy. He was moderately famous.

The fame came not from talent or hard work, but from bearing the surname of one of the richest men in the western hemisphere. It was a hollow fame. And although Cristian hated media attention with every fiber of his being, he was forced to acknowledge that he, and all resident *Vanes*, born "Vane" or otherwise, were fair game for periodicals preying on the rich and famous.

Not that his image was in such great demand; he wasn't exactly handsome, nor was he particularly ugly. Cristian Honey, the enigmatic, camera-shy bachelor, was invariably captured mulling in a reasonably photogenic gray area, where Vane-watchers of either gender could love him or hate him, depending on the breeze. The rags delighted in spinning him both ways, portraying him as a hard-drinking womanizer to one audience and as a closet homosexual to the other. He was neither. Through no fault of his own, master Vane was that rare paradox, the *compassionate misanthrope*. Compassion was in his nature. The misanthropy resulted from nurture. Considering the bloodsuckers who made up his "family," it was amazing he hadn't ended it long ago.

Cristian's boom box died on a dime. He shook it, punched the compact disk player a couple of times, and began rooting through his backpack. Inside were tennis shoes, half a cheese sandwich, a

bottle of warm beer, and a reminder to bring extra batteries. He was just knocking the bottle back when his attention was arrested by a racing engine on the highway, quickly followed by a shriek of rubber on curb. The front end of a hot-pink Town Car appeared behind an emerald patch of carpetweed, and a moment later the red round face of Paris Simms popped into view. There was nowhere to turn, nowhere to hide; Simms was already frantically waving his arms. With a jerky little cry he rolled down the grade, scraped himself up, and pawed at Cristian's arm. Cristian shook him off. "You'd better have eight D cell batteries, Paris, or we're done here." He slapped on his sneakers.

Simms's cheeks and forehead glistened below the bright pink limo cap. "H—" he managed. "H—"

"Heart attack? Hangover?" Cristian shook the driver's pudgy shoulders. "Damn it, man! How many syllables?"

"No, Cris...*hurry*. It's your father." Simms wrapped his arms around a leg. "It's time. We've got to go."

"It's *always* time. We've *always* got to go." Cristian grabbed his stuff and the men staggered up to the highway like a couple of drunks.

The cream leather seats were handsomely polished, the interior gleaming with that all-around sheen only an intensely bored driver can produce. Usually the trunk would be agape; sanitized receptacles awaiting backpack, beach blanket, and sandy sneakers. The rear seat and carpet would be covered with fresh towels. An ice cold Grolsch and one of Cristian's custom-made, exceedingly thin cheroots would be perched on the folding silver tray. Cristian would slide his bare feet into a new pair of sandals and sit low behind the compact pink limo's tinted glass, quietly cursing the staring, grinning public.

But this time the trunk was closed, the interior unprepared.

Before his driver could waltz him in, Cristian twisted back an arm and wrestled him around, poising his rear end for a very rude entry. Simms squirmed out and slid to his knees, clinging. "Cris, let's *do* it, man! Please...don't fight me. Just get in."

"Fight you?" Cristian hauled him upright with one hand, peeled off his cap with the other. "Paris, you know I'm a lover, not a fighter." He shoved him in and kicked the door shut, placed the cap squarely on his own head and stepped around the car.

“I’ll drive, you ramble.”

John Beregard Vane’s American descent can be traced to one Bemford Pye V’aine, a wealthy colonist with interests in Connecticut potash, Jersey pig iron, and Chesapeake shellfish. Thanks to Bemford’s policy of disseminating deliberately conflicting accounts, the details surrounding his rapid acquisition of American capital will forever remain mysteries. What we *do* know is that Bemford, while still in his early thirties, was a ruthless industrialist, slave trader, and speculator playing both sides of the Atlantic. A virile and egocentric man, he kept eleven sons and four daughters in tatters while buying out every business he could get his hands on. Whenever he encountered resistance, V’aine hired gangs of hooligans to shut down competition. But he was no kingpin. The moment things got dicey he took his money and ran.

He ran west, always investing as diversely as possible, always moving on once he’d wrung all he could from a town.

His final breath came at the age of eighty-nine, in the high desert outside a frontier settlement named V’aineville. V’aine held commanding interests in over half that community’s profit-showing businesses. He owned the town.

A week before his death, knowing it was his time, Bemford Pye cashed the town out—sold every business, withdrew every cent. He converted his entire worth to bullion and disappeared in the dead of night with a buggy and horses. His remains were discovered a month later. But not a gram of gold.

Bemford’s surviving children, save one, thereupon entered the world in search of lives. That remaining one, young Milo, stayed behind into his late teens, caring for the ailing widow in the ramshackle, silver birch-columned three-story known as Old Spiderlegs. The woman’s dying wish was to be buried on-property, in a favorite outlook just at the shadow line of the Mighty Eagle Mountains. Her burial, spurned by the entire population of V’aineville, was witnessed by outlying officials and local reporters, and no one was more surprised than Milo when gravediggers encountered a space filled solid with Bemford’s bullion.

The young heir changed his name to Vaine, picked up his father's reins and went west, buying and selling, cornering and calculating. He'd learned from the old man: Milo made sure he owned a piece of everything. Eventually his teams of agents formed a web over the waking continent, keeping a toe in every seaport, in every major city, on every railway. Wherever the land was fairest, there would the spider drag his web.

Unlike his father, Milo made an obscene spectacle of wealth; traveling like a prince, spending like a sailor: wives, children, estates, offices—all facets of his booming mien. His tremendous ego made him take tremendous risks, and he was, overall, tremendously successful. The Civil War was a godsend. Milo bent with the wind, profiting handsomely in Winchesters and whiskey, in cartwheels and coffins. The spider walked the line between North and South with vigor and with dash, all the way to the California lode. When he died, also well into the years, his was one of the first great migrating families to own a major piece of the sprawling bean fields that would one day become Los Angeles County.

A grandson, Timothy Thomas, devoted himself to business while his siblings spent themselves into obscurity. Timothy foresaw the age of technology, and with it the Great War: the United States government became his biggest customer. Eventually prestigious beyond self-censure, T.T. nevertheless dropped that gaudy *i* from Vaine as he groomed himself for a Senate run, and his insular adult son, John Beregard, for the top executive office of his global business empire. Timothy, busted purchasing votes on a Monterey stopover, had his head blown off by a disillusioned supporter.

John never married. And not until past seventy did he produce a child. In his prime his heart and soul were given entirely to business. Important men shared his time.

Vane got an early hand in movie studios, in amusement parks, in public transportation, in fast food. Everything was fast in California, and getting faster. Vane stepped on the gas. Like Milo, he maintained a system of agents at home and abroad, and, as computers took a greater part in the dissemination and retrieval of information, engineered a corporation that, in an electronic haze of checks and balances, ran itself—he instituted *Automated Investment Management*, taking the brunt of guesswork out of investing. The *AIMhigh* corporation was a maze of integrated computers walled behind a fairly large, elegant office front in Hermosa Beach. Its lobby's walnut double doors featured carved profiles of facing eagles breaking into flight. AIM-high in time became a solid institution

employing over a thousand professionals devoted solely to the financial and emotional affairs of John Beregard Vane.

And John built a palatial residence on the California coast, a monument to money. He named the estate *Raptor's Rest*, and made its imperial house a showcase of luxurious living.

To paint himself human, John purchased masterpieces for public exhibition. To paint that human a saint, he donated small fortunes to any institution willing to carry his name. Apparently the public was ready for a socially awkward, harmless old billionaire with an insatiable desire to impress. John caught on and, for a while there, the master of Raptor's Rest was on top of the world. But as interest waned the old man's fragile ego went right on down with it.

Although Vane tried hard to recapture his moment in the sun, advancing age and displays of desperation only made him look foolish. His mind crashed, and with it his health. And one particularly bumpy day he handed the reins to Karl, the Austrian fullback who had served him, with loyalty and with love, for almost forty years. Those many years ago, John had been standing at knifepoint in Kapfenberg when Karl, hobbling from a tavern on his career-ending shattered ankle, decided to take out his self-pity on a completely surprised pair of muggers, breaking the face of one and rearranging the spine of the other. One of those inexplicable friendships soon blossomed, and Karl and John eventually grew inseparable. And so great became Karl's love for John that John needed merely speak it for Karl to make it so. Therefore, throughout Vane's later deterioration, those lavish displays meant to impress the world continued to accumulate, and with a growing accent on the bizarre.

In his early seventies John took a prescribed vacation south of the border to recover from a series of nervous breakdowns. He returned a year later, sicker and loonier than ever, with an infant son he'd named Christian Honey after a messianic hallucination en route (the first name's offending *h* was dropped by the boy at the onset of intellectual maturity, the mortifying middle name buried completely until dug up by gossip rags). On his arrival at Los Angeles International Airport, old John tearfully re-christened AIMhigh *The Honey Foundation*, ordered whipped cream pies all around, and collapsed in the arms of Karl. The eagle would soar no more. He was taken home to die.

Raptor's Rest, a 318-acre estate overlooking the ocean, nestles in a broad line of salmon hills rising majestically above Pacific Coast Highway. Centered on a manufactured plateau, the Vane mansion is a six-armed pillbox virtually unnoticeable from the ground. From the air it appears as a gray and white asterisk with a gleaming hub. The asterisk leans to the sea, on a crazy checkerboard of green and brown.

The Rest boasts six professional tennis courts.

Nobody plays.

Someday spectators will surely admire signed glossies set in gilded frames hung beneath the banner names of tennis greats and celebrity sports anchors. But for right now those frames are empty. Never has a coiffed commentator or bare-kneed luminary posed jauntily amid the figs and periwinkles.

There's a gorgeously manicured eighteen-hole golf course with a spiraling series of lakes, and a clubhouse containing all the amenities of a five star hotel. Yet that clubhouse is of little use other than as a winter stopover for swallows. And not a soul, other than staff, has set foot on the course since its construction.

A long wooded private drive leads from Pacific Coast Highway to West Portico, the mansion's ocean face. Only permanent occupants and V.I.P. guests are authorized to use this road. Art lovers and Vane admirers, on that glorious day they finally show in droves, will make their way by monorail on a little shocking pink train embellished with fancily-painted flames. The rail's station is just inside the highway gate, in a small clearing made up to resemble a Guatemalan arroyo. The station itself is a whimsical recreation of a miniature cantina, with a flashing neon sign above its swinging pine doors declaring, cryptically, *Welcome to Rosie's*.

The rail climbs over groves of pink plantains into the denuded hills, curves above the *La Bonita Hog Farm and Sausage Works*, circumnavigates the sprawling *Dulce Leche Honeybee Terraces*, and concludes, after a dizzying glide through the Central American Flag Garden, on the mansion's opposite side at East Portico's equally whimsical *Cinnamon Station*. There delighted patrons will board a luxurious ten-wheeled tram, and so be delivered to the Corinthian-columned ramp leading directly to the spectacular *los Visitors' Lobby*.

Once inside they'll encounter the stirring self-tribute to John Beregard Vane; philanthropist, visionary, and durable bedridden addict of the Home Shopping Network. Vane's *Hall Of Many Treasures* boasts the world's largest cubic zirconium collection, and is crammed with everything from Thighmasters to chia pets, each article mounted and enclosed in its own velvet-lined niche. The Hall's *Wall To The World* is an ongoing mural of the Raptor himself, posed with captains of industry, heads of state, and his hero, the Juiceman. John, far too weak to stand, is invariably pictured sitting, an unlit Havana in one hand, a banana daiquiri in the other.

After a safari-like tour of the eye-popping *Vane Collection* in Wings Northeast and Southeast, emotionally exhausted enthusiasts will one day embark upon an even grander return route; around the fantastic *Mi Cara Firewalk*, through Vane's gilt-and-granite salute to great Guatemalan generals, and over an intricately tiled pink-and-cream wading pool for nonexistent children. The great man's immense bedroom window offers a superb view of the monorail's entire wending course. Sundays the little flame-covered train, stocked with gaily-dressed members of the groundskeepers' families, makes several circuits for the ailing master. It works just fine.

Those four wings not dedicated to public art exhibits are assigned to the men and women who actually reside in the mansion.

The Southwest Wing houses the permanent Residents and their families. The Northwest Wing contains rooms for Help and Regulars, for the Raptor's personal physician and nursing staff, and for Honey's officers, both legal and security.

Between these arms, spread wide to brace the sea, is the magnificent ocean view West Portico, known by Residents and Regulars as the *Sunroom*. This unique structure is built entirely of curved glass panes twenty feet high by ten feet wide, utilizing chromed steel braces and struts. The room's Plaza doors, smaller than their surrounding panes but similarly shaped, are fashioned of fused cut crystal. The Sunroom, illuminated throughout the day by natural light, is lit by four humongous Waterford chandeliers from the moment the Pacific takes its first bite of the wild California Sun.

Abutting the Sunroom is the *Foyer*, richly paneled and carpeted, featuring matching marble hearths on either side of an elegant, sausage-shaped arch leading into the *Ballroom*, the Rest's great glass-domed heart.

This Ballroom is a stunningly beautiful chamber of polished cedar, designed to accommodate

a small orchestra and hundreds of immaculately dressed dancers. Over ten thousand petite pink roses thrive in ornate marble troughs arranged in a sweet, room-embracing hedge. The great dome's outer surface is ground to produce prismatic effects with the passage of sun, the inner surface feathered to scatter the radiance of a hundred solid gold candelabra at night.

But not a string has been plucked, not a keyboard played. Never has a couple graced that gleaming cedar floor. The Ballroom waits yawning, its candelabra cold.

The North Wing belongs to John, the south to his son Cristian. Taken together, these two wings effectively bisect the mansion and are therefore considered a unit, the *Grand Hall*.

The Grand Hall's northern extreme contains the luxurious bedroom of the master, the rather austere quarters of his man Karl, and a number of rooms holding state-of-the-art test equipment and resuscitative devices.

Cristian's bohemian suite occupies the southern extreme. Adjacent rooms include a library, a small gymnasium, and a miniature observatory half a million dollars in the making.

Stacked leaning between these extremes are the numerous genuine masterpieces and street-bought oddities which have transformed the splendid Grand Hall into an unruly and garish garage.

Even deep into Vane's madness the Honey Foundation continued to blindly take orders from his Austrian manservant, vigorously accumulating great works of art through a ruthless team of auctioneers. Meanwhile Karl, forever loyal to his master's senile whims, purchased countless rubbishy curiosities from hucksters on the Venice Beach strand, and grudgingly invited into residency any unsung street freak who took the old man's fancy.

One by one these parasites contributed to the ever-swelling cast of *Residents* and *Regulars*. And piece by piece those many dear exhibits were mingled with all the worthless purchases, amassed side by side and heaped one on top of the other throughout the mansion. In the Grand Hall, in the Foyer, in the kitchens and bathrooms, near-priceless marble busts teetered between lava lamps and plaster waterfalls. Psychedelic posters and black velvet Elvises shared the walls with Monets and Eschers.

Into this growing maze came a pallid, skinny young woman in a beat-up canary-yellow Pacer.

Megan Griffin arrived in response to an ad in the *Argonaut*, one of several local papers utilized by Karl in his awkward search for a nanny. Once she realized the full measure of her staggering new

circumstances, Meg got right to work on that flagging bedridden John. She *insisted* she was the boy's actual mother. She nursed the idea...smuggled the idea...hammered the idea into his head: she and John had been intimate while cruising the Thames. Cristian was their love child. The Central American encounter was a fantasy, a filthy lie concocted by that devious schemer Karl.

Megan replaced her paisley granny dress with a long black strapless gown, let her raven hair grow to her waist. Everything about her became funereal, as though her very demeanor might encourage John into the grave.

Her one mistake was not covering her scent.

Within a year she'd been tracked down by ex-husband Richard, who let the cat out of the bag even as he made his own play. Richard flattered John shamelessly. Long hours were spent bedside, recounting tales of personal hardship and a fatherless existence. One night the Raptor, terribly moved, tentatively called Richard "son." Right then and there Richard knew. He was in.

Richard's awarded living chamber quickly turned into a teak-paneled, aquaria-filled weasel's lair, where an endless parade of not-too-bright blondes were perpetually promised pieces of his assured inheritance. These used women, drunk and despondent, became temporary fixtures in the Foyer and Sunroom. Eventually, inevitably, they found their way to rehab, the gutter, or the morgue, and so passed forever from the mansion's memory. Yet while in residency they made damned good spies: far from being the simple wry debauchee he appeared, Richard was in fact a cold-blooded compiler of gossip.

But then, one dreary winter's eve, a bizarrely-dressed young psychopath blew in unexpectedly and made straight for the marrow, setting the stage for a chain of increasingly ugly power plays between this dauntless trio of vultures, the Big Three.

Jason Jute, or J.J., or simply Jayce, had been turning tricks for lines and drinks in a Santa Monica Boulevard parking lot when one of his backseat customers turned out to be a bitter young former AIMhigh attorney. Jayce became both live-in lover and partner in crime. With fraudulently notarized papers demonstrating Jayce's incontestable claim to the Vane bloodline, the two quickly established a corner on John; one threatening Megan and Richard with bogus legal actions, the other with very imaginative feats of mayhem. Old John, relentlessly regaled with Jayce's manufactured father-and-son anecdotes, miraculously began to remember. Two pairs of hands would joyously grip

his; the tears would flow like champagne round the bed. But two clear blue Austrian eyes, staring coldly by the door, would remain dry.

To stack the deck in his favor, Richard began importing some of the rowdier members of his old crowd. Jayce responded with a gang of his own, comprised mostly of flashy, hard-boiled perverts. Their war became an immature contest of airs—a superficial show of sophistication on one hand, of ostentation on the other. Richard and his friends favored tuxedos and business attire. Jayce’s group dressed with a flamboyance designed to shock and inflame.

As word of the setup got around, the mansion became a magnet for ruffians and runaways, for hookers and drug addicts, for all manner of street people. Raptor’s Rest grew into a hangout, a home, and finally a battleground overrun by conscienceless marauders—dealing right from the premises, giving birth in bathrooms and tool sheds, warring amongst themselves in a setting luxurious beyond their imaginations. For the sake of party space they dragged statues, suits of armor, and bulky artifacts outside. Priceless items from the Vane Collection were left to the elements. Karl, reduced to a hulking eavesdropper, protected canvas and marble with raincoats, with garbage bags, with slabs of aluminum siding.

The threat was clear. But the more adamantly Karl objected, the more frantically the Raptor resisted. It was John’s first taste of family. Only when Karl began to seriously fear for his master’s safety did he make the situation clear to the Hermosa Beach office. A security team arrived, along with a small army of Guatemalan housekeepers and groundskeepers.

When old John learned he was about to lose his family a stroke nearly killed him. For his health’s sake, Residents and Regulars were permitted to remain, and the security team kept aboard on a permanent basis. The Raptor, convinced by Megan that Dr. Steinbaum was the angel of death, forever banned the man from residency. And Karl, fingered as a nark by Regulars, was ordered to keep his nose out of family affairs. It was a close call, but the scales had fallen from John’s sinking blue eyes. Only the Big Three could be trusted.

Megan, Richard, and Jason, although fiercely competitive, maintained control by coalescing, allowing the general population to institute a pecking order as their natures dictated. The lowest peckers gravitated to wing extremes, occasionally cropping up in the Clubhouse, Pro Shop, and monorail station. This is where the security team was most effective; smoking out homeless and

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