

Savage Glen
and other stories

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Common Denominator

Everybody in this country knows the feeling.

Televised events are *imprinted* on the subconscious—a photogenic president was assassinated, a bunch of half-witted miscreants burned and looted a great American city, some Third-world lunatics used jets . . . and the unsuspecting public . . . as propaganda tools.

These occurrences were not just *news*, they were Time-Life spectaculars, a dead century's standout stories.

But there's a difference between *a*) hearing about it from your buddies, *b*) mourning over popcorn and Betamax, and *c*) actually *observing* these events, in real time, with no foresight, no hindsight, no insight . . . You—Were—*There*, if only electronically, and so were somehow as much participant as observer.

That's *exactly* the soul-deep memory engendered by The Happening On Fifth Street. *You* remember—don't you . . . the talking head breaking in over Oprah—a major event in itself. The cams and

copters all humping—I think it was Channel 2. But this wasn't a slow-speed pursuit. Five drunken idiots were loitering in the drive-thru lane at a Burger King in L.A.—standing there, indifferent to the decent customers attempting to duly edge their vehicles along. They were screaming, shouting, giggling, guffawing. At a honk from a little green Aspen, one, the biggest, spun and flipped off the elderly female driver.

“Fuck you, man!” he bellowed. “I’ll kick your goddamned fucking ass, you ugly old whore motherfucker!” His friends shrieked with hilarity. One of the women—there were two, I recall—lifted her dress, yanked down her panties, and began thrusting her pelvis at the driver. The whole creepy knot just howled and howled.

But that’s all incidental, contextually; just another clip of typical Americans having fun on a hot summer’s night.

What happened next is the part we’ll never forget.

The big guy hollered, “You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

AND RESET!

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

His friends, no less exuberant, were equally caught up. The obscene woman raised and lowered her dress—over and over—her laugh ringing: “Ah-haha-ha! Ah-haha-ha! Ah-haha-ha! Ah-haha—” Her friend fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up, fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up . . .

The other two males, having appreciatively high-fived and butted their heads, high-fived, butted their heads, high-fived, butted . . .

At this point it was really funny, okay? I don’t think there’s a cat out there who wasn’t halfway to upchucking. It was Saturday night fun, man. Nobody knew until later that the live action was spliced with footage taken by some guy with a videocam in the parking lot: there was no reason for the media hoopla until it got freaky. And that’s when we all stopped laughing.

The police responded first, of course. These five misguided merrymakers had to be on angel dust or something. But the situation couldn’t be controlled with manpower. The Five were spilling all over one another, rhythmically repeating their shared sequence, and it wasn’t humorous at all. Their faces grew red and contorted as they

gaspd against an unnatural clockwork, their limbs were seizure-stiff, their eyes bugged and desperate. It was all a mad implosion of thrashing arms and melding voices: “You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha. You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha—”

By the time the paramedics arrived the street was a sea of rubbernecks. The cops had to escort the ambulances in. And these guys were no less useless: injections didn’t work, restraints were a mess; they couldn’t even apply oxygen through that tussle. The Five were gasping and streaming, frothing and vomiting . . . *in rhythm*. The two high-fiving males’ skulls were cracked wide and gushing, and *still* their arms jerked up feebly in unison, *still* their lolling heads begged to collide. And the cops, the paramedics, the bystanders; nobody could hold ’em down—wild stuff, man, *wild* stuff. And it was the looniest form of entertainment imaginable to pick it up on that live feed, as the BK5, as they came to be known, were wheeled in on gurneys, strapped down and muzzled by oxygen masks, their purple faces trying so hard to spew as their soaking heads banged up and down and side to side, up and down and side to side, up and down and up and down and up and down and a story like that gets a brief, but very thorough, run. You learn all about the vitals—nicknames, dogs and hos, probation officers, favorite slash films, etc.—because the heroic BK5, thank our merciful God in all His infinite wisdom, survived.

Nature is the ultimate physician. When their bodies could jerk and foam no longer The Five simply went comatose, woke to an awkward celebrity, and, once they were proven lousy commercial investments, gratefully slunk out of the spotlight.

The initial focus was on ingested pathogens. That Burger King was shut down so the Department Of Health could pose importantly without being interrupted by autograph hounds, by lowriders in limbo, or by any more damned honking old ladies in little green Aspens. Other agencies wanted to know if rap music or the Vice President was the culprit, or if perhaps the Devil Himself, paid seven and a half bucks an hour to hang out a window in a paper hat, was surreptitiously pulling the BK5’s strings.

The whole thing would definitely have blown over, if not for an uncannily similar episode, four days later and not two blocks away.

Rival groups of gangbangers had spilled onto an indoor miniature golf course at the new GotchaGoin’ Mall. Terrified shoppers stampeded concentrically while a couple of furheads duked it out over

a vital piece of plastic turf of no importance at all only thirty seconds prior.

One beady bozo bit another's tattoo.

The second creep screamed and flailed his fists.

The first furhead bit.

The second sphincter screamed.

A bite and a scream, a bite and a scream—and both arms of the human cesspool broke on their champions like opposing waves.

That, again, was the amateur part—caught streaming by a teeny bopper fledgling reporter with a broadband Blackberry. A local news crew, covering the grand opening of Thundergirl's Dine-And-Disco, picked up the action as the looping gangs cussed and whaled in what director's-chair psychologists term *staggered sync*; an erratic-yet-redundant vacillating pattern wherein one group appears to react viciously to the other's retreat, and vice versa. But this, as I stated, is an apparent motion. With so many close-knit individuals involved, the action comes off as almost choreographed, especially on video, when in reality a seeming cohesion is deceiving the anxious observer's eye.

Even the late-night stand-ups didn't joke about this one. It took a riot squad to contain the madness, a major law enforcement presence to control the perimeter. Tear gas only made the repetitively kicking and wheezing combatants labor for breath as they grappled and rolled about. The course was smashed to rubble in the frenzy.

But officials had learned from the fast-food episode. Emergency crews and disaster specialists created an on-location makeshift hospital. SWAT teams sealed the area. Surgeons, anesthesiologists, and blood donors were whisked into a giant ring around the action, where they simply stood stunned, like a tribe of pacifistic Indians round a knot of drunken cavalrymen.

Because in the end that's all anybody could do: stand there with their jaws hanging while thirty-seven spasmodic malcontents jerked and wailed and gasped and spewed into the sweet embrace of unconsciousness.

By this time it was humongous news. Even though no one *really* expected it to happen again, there were individuals, aching for their fifteen minutes, motoring around the area, videocameras in hand. Some of these guys were hooked up with community web sites utilizing a nexus called Retard Watch, stationed somewhere in New Zealand, if I remember correctly. The Board Of Health taped off the Mall for analysis, and got the same reams of nowhere-data as their

cronies at the now-famous hamburger slop, but it was all a great giggle for a while there; watching these lugs in space suits lumbering around a sealed-off parking lot with little bitty beakers in their big dufus gloves. Yet we weren't really all that into the aftermath. By now we were glued to the news—ratings-sweepers on all channels, across the board—as we perched on the edges of our sofas and bar stools, stocked up on drinks and munchies, waiting wide-eyed and wondering, like children on the night before Christmas—waiting for the mostest unlikeliest, for the unpromised third strike, for the boggler that blew away 'em all—waiting, waiting, waiting . . . waiting for The Next One.

Gilbert Flemm had it all worked out.

In a 9 to 5 suckass yellow-light bug stampede, he'd determined, as an electronics grad nauseated by the prospect of applying his talents to some soulless applications firm, to make his living online, at home, in private, at odds with the bigger picture.

He'd been inordinately successful.

At thirty-two he was, both virtually and literally, master of his own domain.

The shades were always down in Gilbert's tiny roach motel of a Boyle Heights apartment. One side of this groovy bachelor's pad was a garage-heap of miscellaneous electronics hardware, patched in to nowhere. Extension cords hung like streamers from hooks hammered into the ceiling, plugs were tangled up in power strips leading to God knows what. The little bathroom and kitchenette were badlands, practically unnavigable due to years of tossing shipping crates, obsolete appliances, and pizza delivery cartons every which way.

The other side of the room is where Gilbert lived. His home/office was a massive cluster of milk crates, monitors, drive housings, and patch bays, all squeezed into a work console produced by a series of squared components casings made perfectly level by a broken desk top. Gilbert had achieved this console environment not by being an artisan or handyman, but by being a *burrower*. The console came about through the constant *jamming* and *shoving* and *hammering* of stuff into place; the space for his legs was effected by repetitively *pushing* and *kicking* and *kneeing* until he'd made stretch room. Grease, dirt, fly cadavers, and dead skin cells made a perfect mortar. His work chair/bed was a ratty old recliner with a floating horizontal frame, allowing him to recline full-out whenever the pixel pixies had overdusted his eyes. His personal urinal was a funky old

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pee jug, one of many, *crammed*, *rammed*, and *jammed* under the desk to make room for his naked, malodorous, scratched-crimson legs. Something of an inventor, he'd devised a peeduct out of a punctured condom wired to a quarter-inch polyvinyl tube trailing into the current jug's punctured-and-wired cap. This way he could take care of vital business without having to ford the lavatory horror.

Gilbert had lots of girlfriends.

Linda Lovelace and Candy Samples were two of his favorites, bygone sweethearts now; looped into some miscellaneous folder or other to make room for recent files. Jenna and Busty and Ginger and Christy; they all came and went, but a techie's heart is not programmed to be long-broken. A man has work to do.

That work involved the remote debugging of programs, the defragmenting of drives, the importing and cleaning up of desktops. Viruses were Gilbert's best pals. Smoking out these little virtual critters made a good living possible, working from home, with mouse of steel in one hand and foggy yellow pee tube in the other. Gilbert had never met his clients—transfer of funds was electronic. In this way Gilbert also made payments; to the bank, to Pink Dot, to his landlord and various electronics outlets. And in this way he drifted along; a retired, sedentary commander in a fetid space capsule, passively sucked into the giving black hole of ever-imploding data, umbilically attached, metaphorically speaking, to a daisy chain of RGB viewscreens, battling aliens for points, trading services for digits, making long, hot, electronic love.

But lately he'd been consumed by a game called Common Denominator. "Lately" could mean any amount of time; Gilbert had no idea of, or interest in, the hour, day, week, month, year, decade, century . . . the game could be played singly or with friends, but "friend" is one of the F-words, and anyway a man has work to do. The concept behind Common Denominator is deceptively simple: the gamer sequences characters, sites, and situations; all contributing to perfectly plausible scenarios with perfectly credible culprits and conclusions—which splinter and evolve into slightly less credible culprits . . . into ramifications of feathered conclusions . . . into rationale forks and logic back roads . . . the butler never did it in CD; the butler's just a butler. But for drifting retired commanders willing to go the distance, the game's an intoxicating mindfuck; a master finds the common denominator in abstractions, in subtleties—in *qualities* rather than appearances. It's not for extroverts.

Common Denominator

Gilbert was so wired in he could follow the game on one of six desktop monitors while simultaneously earning a living, ordering Chinese delivered, downloading porn and avant garde music, shopping on ebay, and monitoring streaming news.

That news, of late, was a major draw, even for a carpal gamer like Gilbert. Those public seizure episodes had been increasing, both in frequency and fury, for some weeks now. Huge rewards went unclaimed, talk shows hosted prescient callers determined to stammer themselves into oblivion. Scientists, theists, and theorists rolled the dice—but all these players, posers, and pontificaters were sooner or later shut down by their own verbosity. Nobody had a clue.

Some of those episodes got really *intense*. Certain fighters had been seriously hurt, a woman and her daughter, innocent bystanders, critically injured in a fray. Collateral damage. Unrelated skirmishes and spot-looting were reported. Also, one participant, seizing in deep shock while impaled on an upright sprinkler, had drowned in his own puke. That very dramatic death, amazingly, was repeatedly broadcast on regular TV as well as over the Internet, to the wailing bereavement of congressmen, televangelists, and suffering soccer moms everywhere. The BK5, dragged out of retirement to plea for peace, were getting plenty of airplay with their ubiquitous rap single, already in the running for Best Song Lyrics. A Christmas album was pending.

Gilbert was singing along right now, partitioning CD clues with one hand, balancing his bank account with the other: “Brothahs an’ sistahs,” he croaked, “don’ play da foo’. Homeys an’ hos, ya gots t’ be coo’.” Catchy little fucker. True talent surfaces in the unlikeliest of ponds. And genius will never die: new applications, new technology, new faces were emerging. Art *evolves*: that booty-shaking finger popper was the natural extension of rap’s brilliant violation of vinyl; but now digital looping was applied—studios had cleverly used the BK5’s epileptic claim to fame—the tight instrumentless vocal harmonies, satirized by the straight community as *aw*, *crappela*, were electronically broken up and repeated as phasing backing vocals: “Brothahs an-*play* da—homeys ya *gots* t’ . . .” until it was almost as good as Being There.

Gilbert Fucking Flemm had an epiphany!

While the rest of us were grooving, grouching, and googling, he’d subconsciously cross-referenced a number of sources in real time.

1. The BK5 were on a *loop*.
2. The CD characters were repositioning in sync.

3. The televised image of the latest oddity was crackling in and out due to a glitch in one of the news vans' transmitters.

4. Said televised image was a melee involving blowhard bikers and barroom boneheads. The location was only a few blocks from Gilbert's.

5. His police broadcast receiver was cycling; whining, grinding, reacting to some kind of pirate signal. 5a. The signal and melee were related. 5b. The signal's source was close by, but receding.

And, of course, 6. "*Yo Homey Yo*," the BK5's celebration of the creative spirit, just had to be the most godawful piece of crap ever recorded.

Gilbert patched the streaming feed to the police broadcast. The resultant scream almost blew out his speakers. He patched the combined input to an equalizer and manually cut out audible traffic until he had a fairly steady audio line, then adjusted it to screen. It was all white noise. In a dream, Gilbert used his joystick to move the CD players intuitively, his other hand tweaking the bastard signal. *God in heaven, he'd triangulated!* He gaped at his wall monitor for a minute, then, terrified he'd lose the signal, mapped and saved it to disk. He printed this out as a straight hexadecimal graph: every particular was established and tabulated; Gilbert didn't need to research the results—he'd found the common denominator.

He sat straight up. The streaming newscast contained a throbbing hyperlink for civilian-police intercourse. Almost without thinking, he control-clicked on the link. His condenser mic's icon came up. A canned voice blurted from his house speakers. Gilbert switched to console mono.

"You have reached the Los Angeles Police Department, U-Tip, We Talk Division. This thread automatically links to the State Of California's Wireless Web Archive, and the call may be monitored for your protection. A live operator will be with you shortly. If you are an English speaker, please press *1* now. Yo tengo caca en la cabeza para todos no mas por favor—"

Gilbert impatiently pinkied the *1* on his keyboard.

Almost immediately a bored voice came in, "Detective Cummings, LAPD. U-Tip, We Talk. If this is an emergency situation, please dial 911. If this is a non-emergency situation, please dial 1-800-LAPD. If this is an earthquake-related call, please dial 1-800-OHNO. If there are communists under your bed or gays in your closet, please dial 1-800—"

"ASSHOLES!" Gilbert broke in.

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There was a tight pause. “Take a look in the mirror sometime, buddy.”

“No! You don’t understand! He doesn’t like assholes!”

“I’m not crazy about ’em either, okay? *Especially* when they get on an official line and interrupt police business!”

“Listen to me! I play this game called Common Denomi—”

“Well, *don’t*—”

“—nator and I was—”

“play *games*—”

“—watching the news.”

“—with *me!*”

“On the side. It’s not food poisoning or drugs or anything like that. Forget the lab stuff. That’s all bogus. Rudeness is the common denominator. Obnoxious behavior in public. Selfishness. Immaturity. No pathogen can single out poor ethics in people! This is a case, or cases, of affronting. Somebody is revolted by these creeps and he’s lashing out.”

A faint click. Now it was like talking in a tunnel. Detective Cummings’s voice came back carefully. “Who’s revolting?”

Gilbert ground his teeth and clenched his fists. It was too late; he was already in. “I don’t *know* who it is. All I know is, like I said, the human factor’s undeniable.”

“And how does your friend accomplish this feat?”

“*I just told you I don’t know who it is!* He’s using alpha over the ether. I just picked it up. Or maybe it isn’t a male. Maybe he’s a she; I don’t know.”

“So tell me, does your shemale friend have a name?”

“I’m trying to be of assistance, for Christ’s sake, as a private citizen!”

The gentlest ping, as hollow as the night. “I want you to understand that the U-Tip, We Talk Hotline is completely confidential. You don’t know me, I don’t know you. Every aspect of your identity is private, and will remain private. So now that we’ve got all that out of the way, Mr. Flemm, maybe we can talk.”

Gilbert’s thumb jabbed the Escape button. Sweat was creeping from his hairline. His right hand danced on the keyboard while his left rolled the mouse. The streaming live inset expanded to full screen. He punched out a sequence and a MapQuest graphic became an overlay. Gilbert reduced the opacity. “Damn.” He transferred the feed to the wall monitor. The resolution was diminished relatively, but that didn’t matter; once he’d configured his GPL to Random, the active elements

in the grid translated to pixel groupings very much like churning dot matrix asterisks. The news scene was a mess. But there were isolated right-angling pixel blotches, like Ms. Pacman in slo-mo, that moved along the streets-grid with mathematical certitude. Order was the common denominator. Gilbert was looking for the anomaly.

There.

One asterisk was chugging along oddly; crisscrossing street sides, doubling back, pausing, moving along, pausing again. Gilbert tagged it: Eleventh and Willoughby. Four blocks away. He popped off his peter pal, pulled on his shirt and pants, slammed on his boots, jammed out the door.

Deep twilight. Emergency vehicles were zooming for Seventh, and plenty of cars were turning in pursuit. It was obvious everyone in the vicinity knew what was up. Gilbert dashed across alleys and yards, hopped fences and cut across drives, finally blowing out onto Eleventh and Willoughby. His emergence must have been a noisy one; lots of pedestrians found it interesting enough to turn from the lights and sirens. One in particular, a man in dark pants and jacket, immediately made for a leaning tenement.

Gilbert ran puffing and wheezing; wanting to meet him, wanting to warn him, wanting to praise him, wanting to stop him. He saw the old door swing shut and pop open. It was a fire exit; abused, infested, a rundown hallway for beggars, taggers, hookers, dealers . . . Gilbert slipped inside and the door slammed behind him. The hall wasn't lit, so he cracked the door. Only an amber street lamp provided any illumination, and that was all of a dim narrow wedge and broken pool. He paused to let his eyes adjust and to catch his breath.

“Before you take another step, I want you to know that I am armed, and that I will not hesitate to take you down.”

It was impossible to make out features in the dark. There was a strong dab of light on the right earlobe, soft crescents and planes at the hairline. Gilbert addressed that area beside the lobe.

“Look, I'm not a cop, I'm not a stalker, I'm not a bounty hunter. I know why you're doing what you're doing, and I want you to know I'm not your enemy.”

A pause.

“What am I doing?”

Gilbert blew out a lungful of stress. “With the device. With the obnoxious people. I don't blame you . . . I don't hate you for what you're doing . . . I . . . I admire you.”

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The figure took a step back. He was now completely obscured by darkness. “Then your timing couldn’t be more impeccable.”

“What do you mean?”

The dark blew out a sigh matching Gilbert’s own. “I mean this whole thing is moving faster than me. If you’ve latched on, the authorities can’t be far behind. And I really don’t think they share your admiration.” Another pause. “I’m burned out, man. Or sated; I don’t know which. So . . . how’d you find me?”

“I’m IT,” Gilbert mumbled. “I’m hooked in so deep I’ll never get out. There’s a game I’ve mastered called Common Denominator. It kind of forces the gamer to think outside the box. My brain cross-referenced, and I put two and two together.”

“Did you call the cops?”

“Once. On impulse. It was a mistake. Don’t worry; I got out of there right away.”

“You sound like a bright lad. So you know all about W.T.T.”

Gilbert fidgeted. “Maybe. Initials are all over the place.”

“Wireless Trace Technology. A War Department development passed down to the police. If you tapped in for a nanosecond you’re tagged. Home, phone, credit, friends . . .”

Gilbert swallowed guiltily. “That’s a new one.” He licked his lips. “Sir, I want you to know . . . I want to make it absolutely *clear* that I took *great* pains . . . I’m certain I wasn’t followed. And as far as anything electronic goes, I’m clean. So, unless they can put a trace on a man’s heartbeat. . .”

“Not just yet, they can’t. How much do you know about my operation?”

“I know you’re working in alpha. I know you’re jamming autonomic activity over the ether. I know the signal cycles in the human brain. I know it’s directional. I know the field’s variable. I know . . . I know the wavelength.”

A casual movement, and an arm rose out of the darkness: brown suede jacket and black leather glove. Nested in the gloved palm was an object not much larger than a thumb drive, plump in shape, with an inch-long bulbed antenna. A red diode blinked twice. “Catch.”

Gilbert caught. It was disappointing, somehow: a crude thing of tin and staples. He slipped it into his trousers pocket.

The arm vanished. “Take that toy and tear it apart when you get home. I know you will; you’re already dismembering it in your mind. I’m out of here.”

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