

THE VEGAN DOUGHNUT SHOP

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Chapter 1: Reader, Beware

Please be skeptical. Don't jump to conclusions. Everybody always seems to jump to conclusions, and they're often wrong -- in literature and in life. Let's see how discerning you are.

We'll start with one morning.

I was nudged awake. I opened my eyes, focused, and saw brown eyes looking into mine.

Morning, sleepyhead," Gale murmured.

Ok, what's the situation?

Who am I? Who is Gale? What am I doing in Gale's bed?

Ok, Gale is a woman. It's a woman's name.

No, wrong.

You mean Gale is not a woman's name?

Sometimes. But not this time. Gale is a man. [ed. Gale was named after a football player, not an old sitcom star or Oprah's friend.]

Then I must be a woman.

Wrong again.

"Nic, you look like hell," Gale said. "Gotta shave that beard," he laughed.

I'm a bearded lady?

Of course not.

We're both guys. What am I doing in his bed?

Uh oh, we're gay.

No, wrong for the third time.

Sometimes guys just share the same bed. [ed. Queequeg and Ishmael shared a bed in Moby Dick.]

Sometimes when Gale and I are out on a case or in a bar, we come home and share Gale's bed; it's king-sized so there's plenty of room. Last night we came home late after a night in the bar, and crashed.

But the point is you've probably jumped to three presumptions that were all false: 1) that Gale is woman, 2) I'm a woman, and 3) we're gay.

Wrong, wrong, and wrong.

Nice start.

Chapter 2: War and Peace

Gale and I met in the war. We became friends over there, and saved each other's lives more than once. On our return we joined the police force -- he became a member of the mounted police, but he rode to his own rhythm, which at times put him in danger, mostly from his peers. I was a lowlier member of the force, who didn't cause trouble. When pushed I could react, but I avoided unnecessary encounters. We were very different in temperament, but alike in important ways; each of us could be gregarious, but didn't like socializing. We knew the streets. I was the softie and he was the hardass.

But times were changing abruptly. Education, religion, and law enforcement were becoming corporate, strangling the past with the bottom line. The mounted police were being phased out by economics and depreciation. We both were eligible for early retirement. We didn't like what law enforcement had become, so we took it.

Gale and I moved into a rented house in the age-restricted neighborhood, bonded by our shared experiences. Females didn't interfere much with our lives. Gale had been divorced, but he had a former colleague whom he visited in a hotel when she was in town, and I had a lady up the street.

Gale and I started a small detective business. We didn't do big jobs, but we kept active.

We had a sense of the past. We weren't corporate.

Chapter 3: Veronica and Jughead

My first editor didn't work out. He wanted to take over and assert his own style; I just wasn't comfortable with him.

He told me, "Nic, your name reminds me of Nick Adams. Or better yet, Nick Carraway. You can tell your story about Gale Barbry, the same way Carraway told about Jay Gatsby. Your point of view is first person participant."

Huh, I just wanted to tell about Gale and our life and make some sense out of it.

He suggested with a laugh that I call the book *The Great Barbry*. Gale was a lot of things, but great wasn't one of them.

"You're a kind of Watson," he said. "Or he's Sherlock, and you're a Baskerville."

The esteemed editor also quoted Shakespeare: "Hamlet said, 'Readiness is all.' Lear said, 'Ripeness is all.' For you, Nic, presentation is all." I'm sure he said it to all his charges. It made me leary -- Gale would like that. He likes puns.

The editor also wanted me to add more plot -- "Plot sells." Later he added, "Words are like coins."

That was an idea I knew wouldn't appeal to Gale. Coinage often became counterfeit. He hated words that were false. He once said to me, "Listen to the next ten things you hear people say. At least five of them will not say what they actually mean. It's a test everybody should take. But people don't care -- they just make sounds."

More plot? I didn't want to just make it up.

"Boswell took liberties for Samuel Johnson," the editor said.

I eventually told him to take his Johnson out the door -- or something to that effect.

I wanted someone with a lighter touch, not just someone who forced me around in highfaluting literary circles.

Veronica answered the call. At first I thought she was a man, because she had been called Ronnie. She was recommended by an ex-colleague. Gale said you're only as good as the people who help you.

"It's funny. But I think four out of five who most influenced me were female, but four out of five who most helped me get ahead were male," he said. "Women affect; men effect."

I was glad he never said that to Veronica. She did both. Like Gale, Veronica cared about language. She referred to us as Thunder and Lightning. I provided the flash.

He provided the Thunder.

Chapter 4: The Proud and the Peevish

Everybody has pet peeves, but for Gale they were a minefield that maimed language. He treated them as threats, not as duds as most people did.

They annoyed others.

We knew one woman who complained when people called children "kids." She'd grumble, "Kids are goats, not children."

An old friend of Gale was bothered by "Irregardless." "It's regardless; there's no such thing as irregardless [sic]," he'd complain.

An acquaintance of ours got stirred up when people used "historical" rather than "historic." Or was it historic rather than historical? I don't think Gale even knew the difference.

Other people's irritations seem irrelevant.

Our own fester.

Gale was avid about all language. Like most people, I don't care much about it. If necessary, I'll make my opinions known, but that's it.

Gale had enough opinions for both of us.

Chapter 5: You Know, I Mean, You Know, I Mean, You Know, I Mean

Our drives to and from Oliver's were some kind of trip. Oliver's was a vegan doughnut shop.

We almost always listened to sports talk on the radio. It never took any time for Gale to be annoyed.

"I've invented a drinking game," he said one time before turning on the radio. "Every time we hear someone say 'you know' we'll take a shot. By the time we get four blocks, we'll be buzzed."

Gale turned on the radio, and we heard the guy speaking say 'you know' three times in his first sentence.

Gale chortled. He was drunk with bile.

It was very rare that we didn't hear the talker say 'you know' several times almost immediately.

"No, I don't know," yelled Gale. "Tell me, moron!"

All the athletes, coaches, and media said "you know" again and again.

"The record is held by the leading sportsbook manager in Vegas," Gale told me. "He said 'you know' four times in a single sentence. Yeah, I'm going to trust his handicapping. Man can't even talk."

"I mean" was another pair of words that Gale couldn't stand. "Of course, you mean it, you said it," he seethed.

One handicapper we listened to on the air liked to say, "Etcetera," but he'd pronounce it with an X.

"90% of the people who use that word mispronounce it," said Gale. "They also leave the first R out of February and the second I out of Poinsettia. And if they knew the word plebeian, they'd leave the E out of that."

And he also kept correcting the use of the word "further." "He didn't hit the ball further," he would complain. "It's not time and space; it's distance."

Further or farther? What's a letter between fiends?

Chapter 6: What Played Second Base

If sports talk on the radio was ugly for Gale, announcers on television doing a game were even worse.

The nadir for Gale was the phrase, "I'll tell you what."

The majority of announcers said, "I'll tell you what."

"It's meaningless," said Gale almost with disbelief. "Tell me. Not what. Just tell me."

"It makes no sense," he said. "But nearly every announcer says it; it seems like they all learn this in announcing school. ESPN must insist on it, and the other stations follow in their decibels."

There also was a single word whose usage made Gale want to fight. Sports talk radio, the announcers, and the public all had a word which they used for anything that was average or even slightly above average.

Everything was "unbelievable."

"You just saw the play, the catch, the event. Don't you believe it?" said Gale.

"You saw it. It may be above average. It's not 'unbelievable.'"

"He's literally on fire," said an announcer excitedly about a batter.

Gale responded, "You're figuratively an asshole."

Chapter 7: Cakes, and Rings, and Twists, oh my!

Oliver's was our haunt.

Almost everybody has a place that they frequent for familiarity. It may be a church, or a bar, or a shopping mall.

For us, it was a vegan doughnut shop. Oliver's had a few tables outside. Sometimes we sat together there, and other times Gale would go inside, but I didn't want to, so I'd stay outside with the smokers and flirt with the girls. I could hear some of the conversation through the screen door, but I could avoid it, too.

Gale had a doughnut and coffee, but I didn't like coffee, so I had a doughnut and water or some protein drink.

Inside there were four booths and five small tables. I didn't want to be inside with the businessmen with cell phones and the tanned cougar ladies with cell phones. They were so self-important, always talking loudly. And -- as Gale put it -- saying nothing.

"Have you ever heard anybody on a cell phone say anything important? Or interesting?" he'd ask me.

I hadn't. Neither had he.

Fortunately the loudmouths, after getting their order, usually left the premises and sped away in hasty pursuit of important appointments with other important people.

Oliver's had been in the same location for many years. It was run by a married Cambodian-American couple who said they had been there for 19 years. When their family took over Oliver's, they kept its name, but there was nobody named Oliver in the family. When an uncle had died, they got ownership of Oliver's.

Jerry sometimes was called Oliver, and his wife Mary was usually called "Marie." Hardly anybody knew her real name. It was close enough. They were very friendly, but there was a strain to her high-pitched laugh at the customers' jokes. Maybe it was her way to avoid having to comprehend accents.

They weren't vegan although their shop featured vegan doughnuts. Gale wasn't vegan, and I certainly wasn't.

But you couldn't tell the difference between vegan doughnuts and the real thing. Or was it you couldn't tell the difference between the non-vegan doughnuts and the real thing? I guess it all depends on what you think is the real thing.

Oliver's had vegan Bismarcks, apple fritters, maple bars, a panoply of glaze and soy. About the only thing they didn't have were Napoleons. But there aren't such a thing as vegan Napoleons [sic].

I liked them all. Gale's favorite was the cinnamon bun.

But he was allergic to cinnamon.

I enjoyed the new visitors who came to Oliver's. They came out of their way to find vegan doughnuts. They usually were friendly, and often they'd stop to question me outside the shop about whether I liked the doughnuts. I did.

And there were the tattooed legions -- mostly young with bold tattoos promoting their mutual individuality. Quequeg would like Oliver's.

Oliver's never did any advertising, but people came from other cities and even other countries. The power of doughnuts.

"Almost mystical," Gale said.

Vegans would put info about Oliver's on the web, and it went viral -- like old-time religion in new garb.

They'd waddle, spring, sidle and shamble into Vegan Valhalla. Whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics [one man always prayed over his doughnut before gobbling it], Anglos -- an endless procession after pastry. Yeast and soy. A "healthy" high.

Every day new pilgrims -- often in taxis -- would arrive. They'd go up to the counter and ask, "Do you have vegan doughnuts?"

"The top two rows," Mary would answer. There were three rows of trays full of different sorts of glazed and glazing doughnuts.

"The top two rows?" the visitors would ask in wonder.

"The top two rows," she'd smile and say again.

The visitors would beam as they faced fried glory.

Chapter 8: A Skillion Knees

Oliver's was our Westminster Abbey -- without kings, poets, or authors. Instead of Poets' Corner, it had what Gale called Holy Rollers' Nook.

There were always the regulars. In their nook, they discussed gossip captured in their eternal book. Gale said it was the only book he had ever heard them mention.

I'm sure they wanted to baptize me.

Gale called it "water on the brain." He'd say to me, "Do you really want to go to Heaven with these people? I hope Jesus has billions of knees for everybody to sit on."

I didn't care much about Heaven or Hell.

In the early morning was the clan who talked politics -- not really politics, more spasms of 12th-hand information they had heard on the radio. We went later so we avoided them.

"These guys think they can run the country, but they can't even control their weight." Gale groused.

I really didn't care.

Gale steamed; however, he didn't want to argue with any of them.

"There's a thin line between faith and ignorance," he said, "and most people have crossed it." He smiled wanly. "That's a pun."

Gale liked puns, and he always reacted negatively when people said, "No pun intended."

"Of course, they intend it," he snapped.

There were a bunch of such lines that infuriated Gale. When someone said, "The fact of the matter," he'd respond, "When people say 'fact of the matter,' they never give a fact. Never."

He hated when people, as they always do, said about a person that "they" did something. He'd cry, "Not 'they,' it's 'he' or 'she.' Get it right."

They never did. And he never stopped hating it.

He also griped about when people say they read something that "talks." People say, "I read an article in the newspaper that talks about it."

"It doesn't talk," he said. "It's not oral."

A guy in Oliver's said, "Hopefully it will rain tomorrow."

"Yeah," muttered Gale. "It's going to rain in a hopeful manner. Hopeful raindrops. Hopeful. Hopeful. Hopeful. Plop."

Why did he care?

"It matters," he once said. "Correctness matters."

Why? I wondered. How could it matter? What difference did it make?

Maybe that was Gale's major problem -- he cared about things that don't matter.

In Oliver's, only doughnuts matter.

Chapter 9: Waiting for Godonut

As well as a place for tattoos, Oliver's had its share of canes and walkers.

Oliver's seemed to be a waiting room for the great beyond. No one ever dropped dead there, but there were a lot of old folks that shuffled for a doughnut on their way to Heaven. Many of them had passed on.

One woman was a pistol. Old Molly always stubbornly crossed the street as traffic whizzed by. I thought she was going to hit me with her cane the first time I said, "hello," and when Gale tried to assist her, she'd have none of it. But we got to know her and had a friendly relationship with her, so much so that she'd have lengthy one-way discussions with us.

She eventually was placed in a home by her nasty daughter, and soon after, she expired.

Harry also was garrulous, and couldn't hear very well, so his wordy meanderings into the past fell on his own deaf ears.

If Harry was a pleasant old man, his polar opposite was the wretched Jake. He was 92 years old, which he told everyone who came to the doughnut shop. The first-time visitors were appreciative of his age, and talked to him with generous praise. As is often the case, first impressions are gullible. Little did they know that Jake proved that one can be a jerk at any age. He was mean and bothered the regular customers. Marie had barred him from Oliver's for a while, but eventually he returned to continue his hoary abuse. He was not waiting for heaven; he was waiting for hell.

Eventually he stopped coming.

Tim was another old man who now lived in a home -- but came to Oliver's once in a while. He had a walker and a smile, and he was assisted by a young woman. That old chick magnet.

Not everybody who expired was old. Simon was a former Navy Seal -- a Hawaiian who was severely overweight. He was huge. He would come to Oliver's and eat piles of doughnut hole. He was found on the floor of his apartment.

Gale and I missed both Molly and Simon. Nobody had taken their place. Or Tim's. Fortunately no one had taken the place of Jake, either.

He was in hot grease now.

Still hanging on were Harry and a couple of other oldsters.

Maybe Gale liked Oliver's because there was always someone there who was worse off than he was.

Chapter 10: Butch and Sundance: Gay or Straight?

I was glad the regulars at Oliver's were not the Wild Bunch -- they were the Hole in the Doughnut gang.

Despite an occasional loudmouth, they generally were an innocuous bunch. This doesn't mean I didn't like them; it just means they were pretty ordinary.

It doesn't mean we didn't have conversations, but vegan or not, tattooed or not, old or not, they had a sameness. I'm sure they all thought they were different, but they weren't. They were grains of sugar on a doughnut.

Their skin may have drawn attention, but their words didn't.

Even Saul who had been accused of murder and was out on bail wasn't interesting. In Oliver's he protested that he was innocent by talking about DNA for an hour without pause.

The religious regulars thought him completely innocent.

I knew he was guilty of boredom.

Chapter 11: Yosemite Samaritan

Gale was a raver, but he also was a carer.

Gale loved animals; I didn't.

At times he'd look out the window into the backyard and enthusiastically say, "There's the bird family."

BFD -- bird family deal.

A group of birds with crowns often appeared there, all in a row with quick little steps. They could run fast. He really enjoyed them and looked forward to their appearances.

One time when we were out for our morning constitutional, he saw some parading across the street. A car came, but stopped to let them cross. Gale gave the driver a thumbs-up.

And he loved rabbits, especially when one of them was alone. Once when we saw the torn remains of a rabbit on our street, which had been struck by some speeding car, it bothered him for days.

I never hunted, but I had no love for birds or rabbits. I did chase the pigeons away from the backyard. He was ok with that. In fact, he himself sometimes knocked on the window to send them into sudden flight.

But once when we were getting gas in a filling station, there was a pigeon struggling helplessly on the ground, and her mate kept swooping down to try to protect her. It was useless. She tried to fly, but her wings wouldn't work.

As Gale drove away, he seemed stricken.

"They put poison out for them," he murmured.

Chapter 12: Bless the Pigeons

I didn't know what Gale really believed, but I knew a lot of what he didn't believe. He cared more for that fluttering pigeon than he did for fluttering churchgoers. It was all in the flutter. One was natural and desperate; he thought the other was habitual.

He seldom spoke about religion -- his usual targets were sports media, athletes, and misuse of language. Fundamentals not fundamentalism.

He seldom mentioned religion in Oliver's; in fact, he avoided discussions of that topic. He knew there were things you didn't say publicly. Maybe that was why he so often seemed frustrated. But ever so often, listening to the radio in the car or watching television at home, there was something that would set him off.

"Religion has privatized morality," he once said. "Every religion should have a foam finger saying, 'We're number one.'"

One time driving in the car, we saw a license plate on the car before us. "Look at that," he laughed. "It says 'hezrisen.' The driver has a hard-on."

Recently, at home, tv had gotten his goat -- or lamb.

"Churches have taken Christ out of Christianity -- which leaves inanity," he said. "The figure of Christ has been pillaged by Christians. His followers have become his betters. There's no humility left. They have redefined him as Jesus the Warrior, Jesus the Banker, Jesus the Bigot, and Jesus the Shopper. Go, JC."

He looked at me with sincerity.

"Nic, there isn't one percent chance -- I swear, not one percent -- that Christ was divine. Some day people will look back on us in the same way we look on the Greeks with all their wacky gods. We know they were deluded." He paused for effect. "I kind of like Zeus. Ah, the brightness of Sirius," he smiled.

"In Oliver's they tell us, 'the Bible tells us so.' But they can't even keep the gossip clear for one day in Oliver's. Can you imagine what time and teller do to a story?"

What did it take, 1,500 years to get it finished? No uncertainty there," he chuckled.

"Then the Loch Ness monster met the Jolly Green Giant and saved the holy peas. Saying makes it so."

Gale was aghast at a book that made it to number one best seller on the nonfiction chart. It was about a four-year old boy who had a near-death experience in which he told how he had met Jesus in Heaven.

"It was either Jesus or Babar," said Gale.

Chapter 13: Hear, Here

Gale was a listener.

He had been since I'd known him. Listening dominated his life. That was why language disturbed him -- he heard it. Keenly. Sharply. Savagely. He was an authentic listener.

His mother may have been the major influence in his life, although he hardly ever mentioned her. The very few times he talked about her, I think it was to establish that he could see beyond the surface as others didn't.

I never knew Gale's mother when she was alive, but I did know she wasn't the woman Gale heard her say she was. You're supposed to listen to your mother -- I had -- but Gale's mother taught him lessons she didn't intend. He learned to listen to his mother, but not to believe what she said. She wound up an alcoholic, which stupefies language.

A shrink would have a field day with that. I had several field days.

Gale's mother wasn't religious, but his father had been born into a large family, so religion lurked in their destiny. She probably didn't want to get pregnant when she did. She was well on her way to being a successful career woman; she was way ahead of her time, but she got pregnant with Gale. Religion -- not hers -- forced her to. It was like she was the Virgin Mother -- a passive vessel. But it wasn't an archangel; it was only Gale's father: a businessman, an earnest enabler. Of religion. And alcohol.

Gale didn't blame religion, but it sure didn't help her. She folded like a house of stained glass cards. Leaving shards for her offspring.

Gale couldn't drink much because of her, but he could listen because of her.

Religion might have served him better.

Or maybe not.

What is life without religion?

It's pretty good.

Chapter 14: Crosses

Gale had never reached the crossroads; he avoided them all his life. He took the roundabouts, and I followed.

These days he sat parked at a crossroads, waiting for the light to change. Unfortunately there was no light; there was only a stop sign. There was constant honking around him, but it only made him more anxious..

Our cases had dwindled, and the few we had were rote. But Gale still waited for the call. He was like others who were waiting for the call that never came.

Gale was looking for some case that would challenge and fulfill him. Not a last hurrah. Just a hurrah.

Gale had decided he wanted -- no, needed -- a case defending language, but there was no such thing. It was what he had instead of heaven, and about as far off as that. He wasn't a lawyer, and would never have chosen to be, so there was no case for him to make in a courtroom.

Once out-of-town at a doughnut shop, we had overheard a lawyer complain about law being having to win the case, which had nothing to do with right or wrong, good or bad. The lawyer said he was depressed by having to win at all costs.

Gale would only defend the good -- or what he considered the good. He would be no lawyer, no politician, no businessman.

Gale was an educator who had never taught. At least not in a classroom.

He recently received the latest copy of the Alumni magazine published by the University from which he had graduated. Gale had a BA in Liberal Arts. His university was now a corporation, and all the magazine was full of was business.

Gale flung the magazine across the room. His past was defunct.

Most people his age lived in memories of their defunct pasts. They turned to crossword puzzles or doubled-down on religion, or got menial jobs. John, from Oliver's, was presently a crossing guard for school children.

But Gale did not live in his defunct past or his diffident present. He kept looking to the future.

At what point does one decide to settle? Does that point have to come? For Gale, settling was merely a pause.

He was always getting ready to overreact.

One time he had staked out a psychiatrist's home, mulling over who knows what. The psychiatrist had been the one who had treated his girlfriend Jan and told her what she wanted to hear. Jan had been to

six or more psychiatrists until she found the one who told her the truth she wanted to hear. Five others told her the wrong truth.

Finally, he drove away.

Now he was ready to overreact again. Most people simply filled in the spaces on the crossword puzzle grid.

Gale went off the grid.

Words were his white whale, his windmills, his light at the end of a dock.

I wore a white star on my chest, which he called my "cross of David."

He had a scarlet letter inside his chest -- A for the entire alphabet. He was branded.

Chapter 15: Special Delivery

We got up and had breakfast. I looked at him. He had his head buried in the newspaper, but I could tell he was waiting for something.

He liked to be unpredictable. He always had been. At times it had gotten him into trouble, but it had been an asset in his career. I could read him pretty well; I had to in order to keep up with him.

He used to tell the story of how he was the only child who wouldn't skip in kindergarten. Or how in grade school, when he was supposed to sing, he sang, to the teacher's chagrin, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

He still twinkled. On and off. On and off.

As we were cleaning up, the doorbell rang.

I hurried to the door to see the woman who delivered the mail.

"Hi, Nic," she smiled.

She had a manila envelope in her hand. I reached for it, but from behind me Gale grabbed it.

I said goodbye to her, but when I turned around, Gale had already disappeared back into the kitchen.

I wondered what was going on. He tore open the envelope and looked at its contents.

Something was wrong.

Chapter 16: Elba: The Twisted Bale

"Napoleon's in trouble."

I started when I heard that name.

"They found him," Gale said. He had outsourced the search to an outfit in another state.

Napoleon had been Gale's horse, when they served in the mounted police. I could still hear the clapping on cobblestones.

Gale and Napoleon had retired -- or been retired -- at the same time, when the city's mounted police were being phased out because of economic strife.

Gale and Napoleon had been separated, because a horse couldn't be in the suburbs. Gale visited and rode Napoleon at the stable in which he was retired. Once when he was on the force I had tried to ride him, but I fell off, and that was the end of that. I didn't try again. Napoleon and I treated each other with a wary respect. I always thought he might take a kick at me if given the chance. I kept my distance.

One day when we drove out to the stable, Napoleon was gone.

"We tried to reach you, but couldn't", a woman with artificial red hair had said matter-of-factly.

It probably was when we were in Mexico.

"They couldn't afford the upkeep," she said. "Most of the horses were sold."

"To whom?"

She hesitated. "To different buyers."

"Why didn't the police take care of him?"

"I told you -- they couldn't afford it. Who do you think was going to pay?"

"I would have," Gale said.

She looked at him and gave a little smirk. I thought he was going to hit her.

"To whom was he sold?"

"What?"

"Who bought him?"

She shrugged. "How should I know?"

She didn't love horses. It was a job for her. The bottom line was the glue in the hooves.

"Let's go, Nic," Gale said.

I intentionally bumped into her as we left. Just let her say something.

Chapter 17: Neighless in Gaza

We stopped the truck with its attachment by the side of the country road. Gale got out. I did too. The road was deserted. We crossed to the other side. There was a long, wooden fence, a ramshackle building, and a tree. The ground had a little grass and a lot of dirt.

There was an object near the tree -- I hadn't seen it. It was motionless.

It was a horse standing near the tree. His head was down. But he was not moving. He was still.

As we got to the fence, he still didn't move.

He looked awful. Dirty and bedraggled. He was extremely thin, the outlines of bones -- like a wound -- coming through his gaunt sides -- skeletal. There was little, if any, life in his body.

What were we doing here? I knew Gale wanted to help the defenseless, but the horse belonged to someone else. The horse probably was near death. Unkempt, thirsty, unfed. I couldn't see any water anywhere.

I heard Gale make a strange, strangled sound, like air trying to escape. He stood by the fence, and then climbed over. Gale?

I looked around; there was no one else there. Then I followed.

"Napoleon," Gale said softly.

Napoleon? It couldn't be Napoleon. Napoleon was always proud. He would never be beaten and broken like this horse. There was no bale of hay.

Napoleon always looked you straight in the eye. And he had a look that could be severe or withering. That look and his massive size allowed him and Gale, who rode him, to dominate any potential crisis in the streets.

This creature had been abused. Napoleon would never allow anyone to abuse him. His eyes were downcast and empty.

Poor, poor, poor Napoleon.

"Napoleon," I spoke louder than Gale..

It was then that the horse reacted. He tried to raise his head, although it seemed difficult for him.

"Napoleon, it's Gale," Gale said with strength in his voice, as though he might will the horse an iota of power. "Gale and Nic. We're here."

For a moment I thought the horse was going to collapse, but with a tremendous effort he raised his head, looked at Gale, looked at me -- I think -- and made a slight snort.

Gale touched him, softly and kindly.

Napoleon knew us.

Chapter 18: Napoleon Redux

I could see that Napoleon was struggling, calling for a strength he no longer possessed.

Gale put his hand gently on his neck. "C'mon, big fella," he said. "We're getting out of here." He looked at me, "Stay with him." He went back to the fence and vaulted over it. On the other side, he put his hands back on the fence as though testing it. And then he walked away.

Where was he going? Back to the truck. He got in, and it roared, and belched. It backed up and then started to turn. And headed across the road. It looked as though it was picking up speed. It was coming toward us.

The truck crashed through the wood and nails of the fence, sending splintered wood everywhere. There was a big space where fence had been.

The truck -- and the attachment -- was bouncing across the field, raising dust. It turned and drove back. I looked at the building to see if the noise had brought anyone. Only Napoleon and I stood in the field. Nobody else had come.

Gale stopped the truck near us and jumped out. He went and unlatched the attachment's back, and went and held Napoleon's head. It was a moment. Then he eased Napoleon forward. The horse took faltering steps. Gale led him into the attachment. It was good it was low, because there was no way Napoleon would have been able to step up more than the short ramp that Gale had let down. But he did go forward and was able to enter the flatbed.

"Nic," Gale called to me.

"Okay," I said and jumped into the attachment. Gale closed the gate behind me.

I saw the container of oats, but a pail lay on its side. The water had spilled and Napoleon was trying to drink the little puddle.

"Damn," said Gale. He had seen that the pail had been knocked over on his wild ride. "I'll be right back," he said to me. he ran to the front of the truck and returned with two plastic bottles of water. He opened the gate and sloshed both into the pail. Napoleon drank.

There were voices behind us in the distance. Napoleon was upright.

A shot rang out.

It missed us, but I saw water was now spurting from the holey pail.

Chapter 19: It's All Greek to Me

A few days later, with Napoleon safely on a farm, we sat outside Oliver's at a table. A man came out with his doughnut and coffee and sat down at the adjoining table. He was a white-haired, older man. We knew him.

"How's your wife?" asked Gale. His wife's name was Aphrodite. I liked her. I didn't know what his name was. They were Greeks.

"She's getting her hair done," the man answered. "So I came here."

Gale nodded and returned to his newspaper.

A little while later, a young couple came out of Oliver's. The girl's bare arms were covered with vivid tattoos, like bright red scales. They walked away holding hands.

The white-haired man turned to us.

"What do you think of that?" he said. "Why would she do that to herself?"

"It's her body. She wants to express herself. It's fine," Gale said, as though he wanted to soothe the disturbed man.

"I feel sorry for her."

"It's fine," Gale repeated.

"I think it's awful."

"No, it's not. She's not you. She's fine."

"If she were my daughter...", the man made a slapping motion.

"If she were your daughter, you'd be estranged." He paused. "She'd say, 'fuck you.'"

"She'll be sorry," the man insisted. "When she has a daughter, her daughter will be embarrassed."

"No, she won't," said Gale. "Her friends' mothers will have tattoos, too. Anyway she's not pregnant."

"Yes, she is," said the man. "She had a big bump." He touched his stomach.

Didn't Gale notice? The all-seeing didn't see?

"Your wife is getting her nails done," said Gale. "She probably puts polish on her toenails, doesn't she? At another time people would think that was crazy."

"I feel sorry for that girl." The man looked at me.

"What do you think?" he said.

I wasn't going to get involved. I simply showed him my chin with its bristly facial hair. That was statement enough.

"She wants to do it," said Gale.

"It's wrong," the man continued.

"Times change," said Gale. "What about divorce, living together, and homosexuality?"

"She'll be sorry," he said.

The old man had three responses: "I'm sorry for her," "She'll be sorry she did that," and "It's wrong."

It was a mantra of certainty.

"You old, white men all supported weapons of mass destruction."

"I was against that," the man said.

"I prefer tattoos," said Gale. "People never get in other people's shoes. Can you imagine how Americans would feel if some other country came in and started taking our natural resources? But we do it, and the country we take from are terrorists."

The man didn't respond.

"I've never understood," said Gale. "The American Dream was hard work by the sweat of our brows. Now old, white men make their money from the stock market. They're like me with sports handicapping. Poring over newspapers is not sweat of the brow."

"I feel sorry for her," the man said. He spoke to me again, "Am I right?"

Their conversation wasn't hostile. It was like throwing barbs into white milk. They sank without a ripple. There are no ripples in certainty.

Old white men want to invade the country of tattoos. For them Tattoo is a foreign language.

Two different lands. They seemed to have one thing in common -- doughnuts.

Just don't tattoo the vegan doughnuts.

Chapter 20: Lean Back

We were home watching television. He also was reading the newspaper. He changed the station with the remote to a political program.

He saw who was on the screen.

"Rude liberal gasbag," Gale said. "Two expert guests, and he doesn't let them speak."

He leaned forward.

"Let them speak!" he shouted.

Gale hated interviewers who never listened. There was one at night, who never followed up. You could catch him looking at his notes for the next question. He was very popular. It drove Gale bonkers.

The guy on the screen was still answering his own question while the experts waited.

Then a commercial came on advertising the station.

"What a slogan -- 'Lean Forward.'" said Gale. "Yeah, lean forward and fall on your fucking face."

Gale changed the channel to a movie.

"Is this ok with you?" he asked me.

Sure.

After a while, an article in the newspaper drew his attention.

"Listen to this," he said. "There she goes again. This dowdy liberal columnist wrote, 'men are dogs.' Know your species, bitch," he scoffed.

He shook his head and laughed.

"Nic, there are things you can't say in public. Like that," he smiled.

"There are lots of things I'd better not say. I'd better not say that there is 99% chance that Jesus is not the son of God. Can you imagine if I did? I'd be barred from the doughnut shop. Or how about if I asked a question as to how would people in this country feel if some country came over and plundered a natural resource and then called us 'terrorists'?"

He laid down the paper.

"I don't think I'd be called a 'hero.'"

I hoped he didn't see me yawning.

Chapter 21: After the Fall

We enjoyed watching movies on tv together. In the last few weeks we had seen The Wizard of Oz, a Thin Man movie, and The Birds.

"Look, Nic," Gale said. "There he is. He's coming out of the shop. See him?" I smiled when I looked at the screen. It was my favorite Hitch cameo.

"Life is a cameo, my friend, fleeting appearances," said Gale. "The stars are forgotten: John Cassavetes, Jeff Chandler, James Coburn, Joseph Cotton. All the stars I saw when I was growing up, but Hitch remains. You need a gimmick."

But even watching movies could upset Gale. When a critic on tv talked about The Maltese Falcon, Gale erupted. The expert pronounced it, "Maltese Foulcon." Gale snapped, "It's not a Foulcon; it's Fall-con. Foulcon is a car or a football team. Falcon is the bird. It's not the foul of man, it's the fall."

We only watched movies on cable without advertisements. And we had never seen any "reality show."

But Gale did watch sports, so he couldn't avoid advertisements. He hated commercials on tv -- beaches, oceans, suns rising, children romping. Children and animals. And nature. Everything was natural.

"Artificially natural," Gale called it. "What do you think they're selling?" he'd ask exasperatedly. "Is it beer or money-management or this week's pharmaceutical product?"

There were some commercials he loathed. In one a CEO, looking soft and smarmy, said, "I looked up the word 'unlimited' in the dictionary." Gale would scoff, "Good for you, what an accomplishment, you friggin' buffoon."

He also hated the commercial, supposedly supporting education and the environment, delivered by mellifluous people with unwavering smiles on their amiable faces. At the end, it was revealed the sponsor was an oil company.

Another commercial he cursed was for a furniture company delivered by a squeaky mouse who was obnoxiously "cute."

"She probably peddled Nazi furniture in World War II," said Gale. "Furniture Rose."

"Don't ever believe anything you hear on a commercial," he said to me. I wasn't about to.

"Advertising makes us vote against ourselves. We're so damned gullible."

I wasn't.

Chapter 22: Rigged Competition

One morning outside Oliver's, I stayed in the car and sat basking in the delirious sunlight, while Gale went into the cool confines and cumulus conversation of Oliver's. In the car it was warm, pleasurable and quiet. I stretched and then settled back and closed my eyes. I dozed off.

A sudden sound startled me. The driver's door was open. I looked over. Was Gale back already? How long had I slept? I didn't know who it was standing there with the door open. Then I was grabbed from behind through the open window on my side of the car. What was happening? Something was on my face -- an acrid, distinctive smell. I tried to break loose. The sun was eclipsed. Everything went blank. And I was without warmth.

When I woke I found I was tied up in a dark place. The dark place was moving. I had a blanket over me. I shook it off. I tried to focus.

Two guys were sitting up front in the strange car. I cursed at them.

"Shut up," one turned and said to me. Moron. I tried to wriggle loose. Who were they? What did they want? We kept on driving.

The same guy on the passenger's side turned again to look at me. "You think you're really something, don't you?" he sneered.

"Big trophy winner."

Long ago I had competed in the ring. It was ancient history. I won some, lost some.

"Madison Square Garden -- big shot."

These guys were real losers. I had never appeared in Madison Square Garden. Things never seemed to be what people assumed.

I was fast and quick. I made a good appearance -- the gray ghost. I had staying power, but I never really had the chops. I liked the competition, but I had never won anything big. A couple of knockout performances. These two guys thought I had won the hardware. Yeah, like the Olympics. Dopes. But dopes in their ignorance can be dangerous. They're all over the world.

Were they actually kidnapping me? What did they think I was worth? Who did they think was going to pay for me? Gale?

If I got loose, I'd smack these guys silly. They'd see what strength and agility are, firsthand.

But they could hurt me. What weapons did they have?

Finally we lurched to a stop.

The driver opened his door and got out. He was a blond bimbo. I tried to lunge, but they had tied me up tighter than I'd imagined. Maybe they were a little smarter than I thought.

"Don't get too close to him."

The back opened.

They jerked me out of the car and pulled me towards a shed. The restraints were leather and chain. They had come prepared.

I dragged my feet in the dirt to try to stop my progress. A sharp sting. One had hit me with something. Again I tried to lunge. Another sharp pain.

Then a shock in my side. He had kicked me. I sprawled into the shed.

Lying there, I was still tightly bound, gasping for breath, and in pain.

The door shut.

I was thirsty. Did they know life needs water? Then I realized they might not need me alive.

Chapter 23: The Shadow Knows

The door squeaked open. I couldn't see because of the light. I had to squint. I made out a figure standing in the doorway. I couldn't tell if he was the blond guy. I think it was. How was I going to defend myself and get him?

This was no boxing match. Get ready. Try to inflict some damage as he got to me. But I was restrained -- I could hardly move.

The figure was immobile. I was immobile. C'mon.

A moment seemed like a millennium. Cloven hooved dinosaur at the door.

I yelled at him.

The figure pulled back. Good, you bastard.

"Whoa, take it easy, Nic," the shadow in the doorway said.

It was Gale.

"Hey," he said. He wasn't a master of words at the moment.

"You're okay," he said gently.

Watch out for those guys, I thought.

Before I could speak, he said, "Don't worry about those punks. I've taken care of them. They won't bother you anymore."

Had he killed them? Probably not. He wasn't a killer, but I would have killed them.

"I'll be right back," he said. Wait. But he was gone.

He returned immediately. He had shears in one hand, a water jug in the other, and a bolt cutter under one arm. He put the tools on the floor and opened the water jug. I gulped and gulped, as the water flowed down my chin, my beard, and my chest.

It was the best drink I ever had. It was just water. It was simple, unadulterated water. He could pour it on my head and baptize me at this moment. Anything he wanted. For me it was pure sensual pleasure -- the nourishment of basic life. I didn't need baptism -- I just needed to drink. I just needed to live.

Gale never told me what happened to the two thieves, and I never asked what happened. I'm sure some vengeance took place. They just vanished.

After my desperate guzzling, Gale cut the leather and the chains with his handy tools. I hurt all over and limped, but I made it back to his car.

Water matters. Words don't.

Chapter 24: Life Is a Cameo, My Friend

We were sitting in the living room. Gale was quiet. A lot had happened recently, but he still seemed unsettled, as though he wasn't comfortable, as though the itch was still there. Then he turned on the tv.

"TV is now on," he said. "Pandora's box of prattle is open for business."

A movie was on the screen. It glowed.

"It's A Wonderful Life," he said. "Another life was made special when an angel croaked."

I looked over. He sat calmly attentive to the screen. He changed the channel and found a game. He glowered. After a while, he spoke.

"Hopefully," he said.

"You know," he said.

"I mean," he said.

"I'll tell you what," he said.

"X-cetera," he said.

"The fact of the matter," he said.

"Irregardless," he said.

A few moments passed.

"Did you hear that, Nic?"

What?

"The guy just said the play was 'unbelievable.' Did you see it? Another common, average play was called 'unbelievable.' But I saw it -- right in front of my very eyes -- so I believe it. Why wouldn't I believe it? It's not unbelievable. It's very believable. Are you only supposed to believe what you don't see? Unbelievable. Unbelievable. Unbelievable."

I stifled a yawn. And closed my eyes.

The only sound now was coming from the tv. The crowd was a dull roar.

I was slipping into a garden -- Eden, Gethsemane? -- where all was remote.

I was jolted awake by a sudden, loud explosion, which shook the room.

I was startled. I looked over at Gale.

He sat motionless in his chair with a pistol dangling from his hand.

Chapter 25: Stay Tuned

I think he was smiling.

I looked where he was looking. The tv screen was gone. There was just an empty space.

He had shot the tv.

"Believe that," he said.

We sat silently for a long time.

Then Gale sprang to his feet.

"Nic, let's go for a run," he said.

I looked at the broken glass lying in front of the tv. The tv was gaping and silent.

He was headed for the door.

"Sounds good," I responded.

We ran together through the neighborhood, until we finally had to stop to catch our breath. We didn't speak.

Then Gale broke into laughter.

I joined in.

It was a hell of a run.

Chapter 26: The Secret of Life

You're a savvy reader, so when did you guess my identity?

When did you get beyond the appearance? I alerted you on page one to be skeptical and perceptive. Some of you knew my identity before you even opened this short book. You'd been told. I'm not directing this to you. I'm directing it to those who discovered it for themselves.

I'm a dog. Let me formally introduce myself. I'm Nic, a Bouvier Des Flandres. I have a beard and a thick gray coat. My breed was nearly wiped out by war. I make a good police dog. And I'm a potential dog show competitor; in fact, I was in a few competitions.

If you don't think I'm smart enough to have told this story, that's your problem. Suspend your disbelief -- you do everywhere else. The people who know my breed know I'm smart enough to give me the benefit of the doubt. I gave you the benefit of the doubt when I called you "savvy."

Now get ready for the sacred truth. I'm going to reveal the secret of life.

Ready? Here it is:

Woof. Woof.