

CHAPTER ONE: “A STANDARD BY WHICH ALL OTHERS ARE MEASURED”

Yeah, well, since it's Friday afternoon, that means I've gone through nearly a whole work week of reality time.

Went kind of fast, actually. Plenty of stuff happening. I didn't even think much about the Ultimate Bike Path, the Old Guys, any of that. I'm not sure why.

Yes I am.

Right, Holly Dragonette. Big surprise, huh? Real tough getting inside ole Jack's head. I could feel how hard you were trying.

Assuming she'd ended the “old business” with Mr. Cedar Rapids last Sunday, I'd hoped she would call either then or on Monday. She didn't.

So then I figured she would call on Tuesday. She didn't.

But I *did* get a birthday card from her that day. Yeah, my birthday was on Wednesday. Thirty-five, not any great significance, like the “big three-oh,” or the one I have to look forward to in five years, when your friends wear black arm bands, give you “Over the Hill” coffee mugs, and tell you that the helium balloons are to help you elevate what is undoubtedly limp and shriveled...

Anyway, seeing the return address freaked me out at first. Thought I was the recipient of a “Dear Jack” letter or something. Uh-uh, it was just a card. Not one of those cutesy generic Hallmark things, which isn't Holly's style. This was an astrological card with a colorful picture of Cancer the Crab and beautiful Earth maidens with rainbows and flowers and such in their hair. That's how Holly knew it was my birthday, because being into astrology she had asked me what my sign was. (She's a Libra, by the way, and I hear *they* can be pretty off the wall...but then, what do I know?) On the inside, heretofore blank, she had written *Jack—Happy Birthday!!!* (Her three exclamation points.) *Talk to you soon. Holly.*

That was it.

Well, I liked the *Talk to you soon* part. But *soon* wasn't Wednesday, or Thursday, or today...yet.

Who cares?

Guess I must, to make myself so crazy with it.

I *did* get a call from my mother, Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal of Pompano Beach, Florida, which was amazing, since it hadn't been “two weeks around” since the last time I'd spoken to her. Earlier in the week I'd gotten *her* birthday card, the identical one for three years now. I think it's because, see, she buys these boxed sets from Hadassah or some other fund-raising organization, so assuming there are ten in a box, I can look forward to the same one until I'm forty-two. At least there was the usual nice money order, which enabled me to partake in a compact disk mini-orgy at my favorite record emporium.

You remember my mother's accident last Saturday? Well, no problem, she's doing fine. But her best friend, Sadie Melman? You know, the woman of a thousand *oys*? In all the excitement of the day she had “worked herself into a conniption” (my mother's words) and was now bedridden. (*Maybe you'll send her a get-well card, Jackie? You know how much she likes you.*)

I met Sadie Melman once, a few years ago, when I went there to visit my mother. Next to the aforementioned Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, Sadie is my “biggest fan” in South Florida. She even calls me “Meester Miller,” impressed as she is by the fact that I'm a writer. (“Oy, Meester Miller, I just *feenished* Bloody Cockroaches of Ish Kabibble!” “*That's* Blood Roaches of Ibasklar, Sadie.” “*It was great, it was wonderful, I enjoyed it a lot...maybe you'll explain to me what it means?*”)

Well, I considered sending a card to Sadie, then figured she might get so excited that she'd have an even bigger conniption and die (Can a person *oy* herself to death?), and it'd be my fault, so I let it slide.

At least I didn't have to spend my birthday alone. Nope, my good buddy Phil Melkowitz saw to that. He and his significant other, Jennifer King, took me to the Mandarin Plaza in San Diego, where we pigged out on the restaurant's famous All-The-Chinese-Food-You-Can-Stuff-Into-Your-Face-At-One-Sitting Buffet. It was *wonderful*. Nothing like a sweet and sour pork orgy to drown your sorrows.

I told you that Jennifer and Holly were cousins. That was how I met Holly in the first place. But they weren't *that* close, so Jennifer couldn't say for sure how the current scenario was going to turn out. Her guess, based on some "girl talk" between them when Holly was out here, was that the thing with Mr. Cedar Rapids was over, that my cross-country bike ride to Iowa would still go off as planned, soon.

Nice lady, that Jennifer. Hope she's right.

I did get another call on Wednesday, although it had nothing to do with another year of my life passing by. Izzy McCarthy, my agent, had no memory for birthdays, not even his own. I once asked him, and he had to look it up on his driver's license. Yeah, I swear! Couldn't remember anniversaries, either, one of the reasons why, he once told me, he had two ex-wives. Uh-uh, that wasn't why he called.

It was good stuff, actually. You remember my projects being put on hold because of the upheaval at the publishing house? Okay, they're definitely going ahead with *Wasp Women of Nabeedi*, and even though the sequel to *Tree Men of Quazzak* was still hanging, Izzy believed it would be resolved soon. So, in about eight months another Jack Miller literary gem will grace your local bookstores, supermarkets, and airport newsstands!

Speaking of writing, I spent time earlier this week consigning to hard disk all that had happened on my most recent excursion along the *mbuva lun gallee*. Didn't seem to take long. And since I felt a need to lose myself in work I started giving thought to a new project, even though it hadn't been that long since I'd finished my recent masterpiece, *Mutant Bats of Krimmia*. To tell the truth, I wasn't too bent out of shape about the publisher's decision to hold on the sequel to *Tree Men of Quazzak*, because I really didn't feel like doing it yet. In fact, I actually considered starting a book that *wasn't* fantasy, something that Izzy had been *noodging* me about for the longest time now. ("You want to make real money, Jack? Stop writing that same old crap. You're versatile, I know you are.")

Okay, so I thought I'd find out just how versatile I was. Forget writing westerns, jet-set romances, books on making Cobol easy to understand, house plants, meditations for the New Age, or anything about *Women Who Love Men Way too Much*, *Men Who Don't Love Women Enough*, *Why Do Women Love Men?*, *How Come Men Like To Love Women?*, *Men Who Love to Hate Women*, *Women Who Hate to Love Men*, *Are You Addicted to Men?*, *Twelve Steps to Breaking Your Addiction to Women*, *Thirteen Steps to Getting That Old Baggage Out of Your Life*, *Fourteen Steps to Successfully Bringing New Baggage Into Your Life*, or *Zen and The Art of Codependent Women Loving Men Who Learn to Leave Women in Fifteen Steps Because of Their Dysfunctional Type G Personalities and the Eternal Quest for the Tao of Higher Consciousness and the Enlightenment of Loving Themselves Through Crystal Power*. Nope, it had to be something I enjoyed reading.

So I decided on a horror novel. Yeah, I'd read my share, and based on the best-seller lists for the past two decades, *so have you*. Now, the way I've always done a book is title first, then story. It's just the way I work. And based on all the brilliant titles I'd concocted for my fantasy novels, you'd think that wouldn't be a problem, right?

Here's the thing: most horror novels have either one-word titles, period, like *Carrie*, *Cujo*, *Koko*, *Creature*, *Watchers*, *Strangers*, *Warm*, *Whispers*, or two-word "The" titles. You know, like *The Glow*, *The Well*, *The Stand*, *The Fury*, *The Rats*, *The Mask*, *The Unwanted*, that sort of thing. And the trouble is, most of the good titles are taken. So at this stage of the week, Friday afternoon, even though I have a story line rolling around in my brain, I have yet to write word one, because there is still no title gracing the top of the page.

But it hasn't been for want of trying. Most of yesterday, either walking on the beach or pacing around my condo a few hundred times, I thought about titles. Here's some of what I came up with: *Entrails*, *Hogs*, *Vomit*, *Intestines*, *Bleeders*, *Molars*, *Squids*, *Liver*, *Mandibles*, *Lobotomy*, *Plasma*, *Sewage*, *Clams*. Or: *The Creep*, *The Gutting*, *The Maggots*, *The Rending*, *The Retching*, *The Slicing*, *The Microwaving*, *The Silverfish*, *The Gerbils*, *The Vile*, *The Gross*, *The Repugnant*, *The Unspeakable*, *The Stench*.

What do you think?

Anyway, it's a real tough choice—which I haven't made yet—and I know I'm procrastinating, but what the hell. Jack Miller's new opus of unbridled terror will have to wait, because—for the first time this week—I actually began thinking how nifty it would be to again ride the Ultimate Bike Path. Sure, Holly might call while

I was gone, but since in real time I would only be gone an hour or two, what did it matter? After all, did she think I had nothing better to do than sit around and wait for her to phone?

You know all those aforementioned books on men and women and relationships and codependency? Maybe I wasn't going to write one, but it's possible that *reading* a couple wouldn't hurt.

Is Holly Dragonette the great-whatever grandmother of Melvin Butterwood, or...?

Okay, enough making myself crazy with that. The Nishiki on my bike rack, Padres hat firmly on my head, I drove up to the Starting Point on Camp Pendleton.

"Can you hear me, Old Guy?" I said out loud, feeling kind of stupid, as always. "I'm ready to rock and roll. How about meeting me at the tree and letting me know what's happening?"

The afternoon commute being a few hours away, the drive up to Oceanside was easy. Today I managed to enter Camp Pendleton's main gate only after signing in, showing three IDs, and informing the MP who won last year's World Series. Sometimes it's like that.

Not many people rode the bike lanes. All along the way to the lone eucalyptus I kept putting out vibes to the Old Guy and his cronies, but at first it didn't do much good, because there was nary a soul on the mesa. Just for the hell of it I pedaled north another half a mile, then turned around. Felt kind of good being out, to be honest.

Remember me mentioning that the once-beautiful flower fields near the eucalyptus were being replaced by base housing? Okay, the construction was moving along rapidly, and recently, on both sides of the street off Stuart Mesa Road leading into the housing, they'd raised a low wall, so that you felt like you were passing through a gate into a private community. Lots of suburban developments have these entry statements, and they're sometimes ornate, and they almost always bear the name of the community: striking names like Poinsettia Estates, Meadowridge, Casa Del Oro, Indian Creek Villas. So, do you know what the statements to Camp Pendleton's base housing on Stuart Mesa had carved on them?

STUART MESA HOUSING.

We're talking right to the point here.

Anyway, I was about to set off on another jaunt when my Old Guy appeared, pedaling furiously in low gear up the Stuart Mesa hill. At first I hadn't thought it was him, because, whoa, you would not *believe* what he was riding, or how he was dressed! His old Schwinn had been replaced by a Bridgestone MB-3; he wore a sleeveless yellow jersey, blue and black Performance cycling shorts—which did a great injustice to his knobby knees—a pair of Nike Fatz shoes, sans socks, and a Vetta Corsalite helmet. It was only when he waved vigorously and nearly fell off the Bridgestone that I knew for sure it was him.

"Halloo, Jack!" he called, then angled across the road and was almost flattened by a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, the driver leaning on the horn for five seconds. Unperturbed, he hopped off the bike (rather gracefully, this time) and stood it against the eucalyptus, then shook my hand in that electric way of his.

"Nice to see you again," I said. "So you got my message."

He grinned. "Yes, this time I was home."

"Uh, right. Where are your buddies?"

"We've been involved in a number of projects since our paths last crossed. At the moment we are trying to understand why the flesh-eating tree mice of Estinarra II suffer from such severe urinary tract problems."

Jeez, it's always something like that, isn't it? "Yeah, well, a Nobel Prize in Medicine will be awaiting your group when you come up with that answer," I told him, and he beamed proudly, so he must've believed me.

"Thank you," he said. "In any case, your excursions along the *mbuva lum gallee* take precedence, so the others will soon be joining me." He scratched his head. "Most of them, anyway. I have good news and bad news. Jack."

I showed him a stiff upper lip. "Okay, give me the bad news first."

"Old Guy #2 is in charge of that study and must remain with it for a long time, so in all likelihood he will not be observing you anymore."

That was the bad news? "Dang, and I was really fond of him, too," I said, which puzzled the Old Guy, since I'd only met Old Guy #2 once, for about two minutes, and I wasn't even sure if it was him or #1.

Anyway, my Old Guy grinned and announced dramatically, "But the *good* news is, we have someone to replace him!"

“Aww-right, New Old Guy #2!”

“But that’s not it, Jack.”

“You mean...there’s *more* good news?”

“Yes, there will be *two* other observers on your upcoming excursions!”

Old Guys #5 and #6! Was I becoming a hot ticket, or what!

“Well, I hope they won’t be disappointed.”

“Having followed you through so much, I know they will be impressed. Uh, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

He seemed tentative. I knew what was on his mind. “Have you heard from your female since the last time I saw you?”

So, the study of carnivorous mice who couldn’t piss properly *had* kept him from looking in on my private life. “Nope, not a word from Holly.”

“Didn’t think so. Why else would you want to return to the *mbuva lun gallee* so soon?” He shrugged. “I still cannot begin to understand, but I intend to continue my research during some of the lulls. Honestly, this concept of heterosexuality is...well, enough of that, because I know you wish to begin, and my field will disperse soon anyway. Be assured that the study group is with you at the outset. Good luck, Jack!”

It seemed that there were questions I’d been meaning to ask, but at the moment they escaped me, and I really *did* want to get going. The Old Guy climbed back on his Bridgestone, waved once, and continued north along Stuart Mesa Road. This time, staring after his retreating figure, I actually saw him begin to fade in a shimmer of little dancing lights. No shit, *Beam me up, Scotty!* I guess he knew enough to prevent anyone else from seeing him, or there might’ve been some interesting stuff on the news in recent weeks.

Whatever; the hillside was deserted, and there was a mother of a tailwind, so it didn’t take much effort to hit thirty-two mph, which was when I shifted easily into the twenty-second gear...



...and burst through the blue door onto the Ultimate Bike Path for what seemed the first time in a long while.

You know, even though I haven’t said much about it since the whole thing began, I’ve given thought to the enigmatic twenty-second gear, discovered long ago by the intrepid explorer named Vurdabrok. Okay, I know for sure that it’s included in the half that I couldn’t possibly begin to understand, but still...what the devil is it? How does it work? Even when Old Guy #3 (or #4) had it stripped down in Lethargia, I couldn’t tell a thing! Ah well, maybe after I’ve acquired some vast store of knowledge and wisdom (yeah, right), it’ll all seem as easy as the concept of a light switch.

Just how *does* a light switch...never mind.

The copper-colored walls of the universal tunnel seemed as familiar to me as the paneling in my spare bedroom, which I used as an office. After the first couple of times I’d always found riding between them relaxing. I started slowly, taking in each of the gates, presently a random mix of Gorbachev birthmarks, Elmer Fudds, blue doors with pyramids, and iridescent snowmen. Before long the Elmer Fudds dominated, so I switched to a cadence that was many steps below blur-speed, but still fast enough to produce the kaleidoscopic effect, which I enjoyed. I slowed down amid a long run of Bart Simpson heads, immediately sped up while trying to keep my brain free of any thoughts about this and that, then resumed the leisurely pace when the random pattern—this time with no less than six different gates—began again.

The first rider I came across, traveling in the opposite direction, was something that looked like an upside-down, purple and yellow parrot with three twig-like legs (I think) stuck in an equal number of lettuces (letti?). Even though both of us were going slow, there was only a split second that we rode near each other. I said hello; it clattered its beak (or something), and we went on, and that was that.

But the second rider *was* going my way, and it nearly scared the shit out of me when it overtook the Nishiki. “Nice weather we’re having,” a voice on my left said.

How come I knew that voice? I thought, after nearly wetting my spandex. I glanced over.

Oh, shit, the diseased rat with the dreadlocks in the bedpan go-thing.

“Hey, it’s you!” the rat exclaimed. “I was looking for you; it’s the reason I’m riding along.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Remember when I had wullat, and you suggested I go through that Elmer Fudd gate and find Hazel the Healer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, I found her. Wow, what an ugly hag! Anyway, she cured me of the wullat, and I wanted to thank you for the advice. Shake, pal!”

I looked at the rat dubiously. “You’re sure Hazel took care of it?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Well, what the hey. The worst scenario was, even if he still had wullat, I wasn’t about to contract a tingling in my whiskers.

I reached for his little paw.

An inch away he suddenly pulled it back and cried, “Whoops!”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I forgot there was another reason why I was riding along.”

“What’s that?”

“I have ibla, and it’s transmittable through skin contact.”

“Oh, really? What’s ibla?” I smiled. “Will it make my nose twitch, or my tail stand up straight?”

The rat shook his head, the dreadlocks smacking him in the face. “Ibla causes your testicles to swell up, then explode within the first three hours. I have about an hour left to find Hazel the Healer again.”

See? Another one of those rodent things...

Causes your testicles to swell up and explode? Jesus!

I’d been one inch away from having ibla!

“Maybe I should ride on ahead,” the diseased rat said, “so that there’s no chance of you...”

I didn’t hear what else he said, because (all together) *I got the hell out of there fast!*

Not ever again, I thought as the gates sped by at blurrier-than-blur-speed and nearly made me dizzy. I don’t care *how* personable the little dreadlocked guy or his brethren might be. Next time I see another one, *I’m gone!* At least I didn’t feel an overwhelming urge to wash my hands, or my...never mind.

After a few minutes (seconds?) of blurrier-than-blur-speed I considered the potential of doing serious damage to either myself or another traveling life-form, so I slowed to a safe speed. Uh-oh, I didn’t like this at all. You remember those creepy gates shaped like upside-down toothbrushes with the heart halfway up the handle? That’s what there were a whole lot of now, and they were giving off one really weird aura. Okay, that was worth a burst of blur-speed.

But fortunately it was a short run, and pretty soon there appeared a random pattern of black circles, watery green Florida gates, and the ubiquitous Elmer Fudds. I was still trying to get that dreadlocked rodent out of my head as I slowed down. At about the same time I realized that I was now ready to lose myself in one of the gates, so I concentrated on any that might beckon. But as yet none seemed inclined to extend an invitation.

Then, another anomaly popped up on the *mbuva lun gallee*. Oh, great!

Remember when the Ultimate Bike Path split off in two directions? Remember how thrilled I was about it?

The Ultimate Bike Path now split off in *three* directions!

No, I didn’t have a *clue* what to do, especially in the one-point-one seconds (even less than last time) I had to make a decision. So, not particularly inclined to the far left or far right in other aspects of my life, I chose the middle tunnel.

Almost immediately I regretted that decision.

Toothbrushes and Bart Simpsons dominated, their combined emanations *really* unnerving. Being in a cautious mode I pedaled by them slowly, which turned out to be a good thing, because in a short while this tunnel split in two!

Hey, was I having fun yet, or what! How about *or what?* This was a bit much, considering the fact that all the times I’d ridden the Path before, this had happened just once. But the only alternative to this new fork was a Bart Simpson on one side or a toothbrush on the other.

What the hell, I took the right fork.

Okay, this wasn’t bad. A couple of toothbrushes, but mostly iridescent snowmen, Gorbachev birthmarks, and...

A *new* gate!

It was shaped like the profile of a shopping cart and had large, multicolored bubbles, similar to the ones you see in lava lamps (available at most garage sales), floating slowly in an amber mist. You could actually hear the bubbles *blurping* as they formed, and another sound, a sort of oscillating whistle. Not a particularly ominous gate; rather pleasing, in fact, worthy of an excursion.

So of course, just as I think this, there are no more shopping cart gates. Well, there were only two to begin with. I kept looking for one amid a long run of blue doors and isosceles triangles, but no go. Okay, I can be patient.

Something felt weird. I'm not sure if it had to do with the fact that I rode along a fork of a fork of the Path, or what. My anxiety level had risen to somewhere between my knees and stomach, which was puzzling, because this enigmatic universal tunnel usually had a calming effect. I couldn't quite put a finger on it...

Then I realized I was riding at an angle, both bike and body skewed to the left.

Not steep, but slight, like the lower part of a velodrome. Still, I felt odd. Before long I straightened out, then tilted again, this time to the right, and more sharply. It stayed like this for a while.

Then, the fireworks from an isosceles triangle poured out of that gate, exploding soundlessly but brightly all over the *mbuva lun gallee*. Scared the shit out of me.

The pyramids from a blue door came whizzing through the air, like nunchucks hurled by a ninja. They buried themselves into the opposite "wall" of the tunnel; again, no sound.

What in hell was going on here?

One of the Florida gates overflowed its banks. The water rushed toward me like the flash flood on the Universal Studios tram ride. Having no desire to find out whether I would really be drowned or not, I pedaled faster.

My *angst* climbed up to my clavicle.

The angle of the misty "floor" grew steeper yet. I *had* to slow down.

More fireworks, more nunchucks. And now, the veins and arteries from the "heart" on a toothbrush gate snaked toward me like Medusa's hair after an unsuccessful perm. They weaved amid the spokes of the wheels, under my chin, around my head; two of the sinuous things made like they wanted passage up my nostrils.

A scream was definitely forming.

I batted the strands away. They felt wet and warm, but otherwise not very menacing.

More toothbrush gates appeared; hence, more of the stupid soggy strands. Then I was level. The weird stuff fell behind and stayed there.

Soon my anxiety level had dropped to my ankles.

With that entertaining interlude over, I concentrated on the portals. I was still hoping one of those shopping carts would show up, but no, the Force wasn't with me, so it was mostly the damn toothbrushes, with an occasional Gorbachev birthmark. Now, the last Gorby I'd popped through had seen me roaming the countryside as a padoodle and spending some time in Frankenstein's castle, among other things. Yeah, well, was that so bad? Maybe it was time to try another one.

Then I got to thinking about something.

You don't happen to remember Rule-To-Live-By #789 when traveling along the Ultimate Bike Path, do you? Well, don't tax your brain; it has to do with *never* entering a toothbrush gate. Now I was thinking, *Why not?* Yeah, you're right, we've gone through this scenario before. But I'll say it again: I *am* an explorer, and I'm breaking new ground here, and I'm supposed to take the bad with the good, right? Okay, so the world beyond the last toothbrush gate was no pleasure; but maybe the next one will be Paradise, or a place where the women make Amazins and Vulvans look like hags. (Isn't that the *same* as Paradise?) So why be narrow-minded? I decided to try another toothbrush gate.

I angled toward one on the right, doing my best to ignore the fact that it was pulsating eerily.

Do you know what a benchmark is?

A benchmark is a high standard by which all other things are measured. You know, like the Louisville Slugger is the benchmark of baseball bats, and Sir Laurence Olivier is the benchmark of Shakespearean actors, and so on.

We've also had occasions to discuss the topic of enlarged posterior orifices, haven't we?

Jack Benjamin Miller, son of the late Henry Miller (not the writer) and Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, was about to become the benchmark of enlarged posterior orifices.

You'll know why in a few seconds...