

D I S P H E

Reports from everywhere, by our far-flung correspondents. . .

Dog Barber

The following letter reached our office the other day:

MILAN -- I am a free lance writer based in Italy. This is a lot easier to say than it is to prove, especially nowadays when there are possibly more freelance writers in Italy than there are Italians. I have an article idea I would like to pitch.

Abandon lunch all ye who enter here: *Er Canaro della Magliana*.

Er Canaro is Roman dialect for "the dog barber," for that was the profession practiced by Pietro De Negri, a dark and diminutive immigrant to Italy's capital from Sardinia. From the sunny hardscrabble of his home island, De Negri moved some dozen years ago to La Magliana, which at the time was one of Rome's many affordable suburbs. With the passage of time and the efforts of Italy's ever-expanding Mafia, La Magliana became a barricaded outpost of drugs and two-bit hoodlums, where life -- like the inhabitants themselves -- had become nasty, brutish, and short. De Negri married, had a little girl, and tried to go about his unassuming, rather milk-toastish profession of coiffeur and pedicurist to the neighborhood dogs.

De Negri did not realize it, but he was slowly being drawn into the role of Nemesis to a brutal and ambitious young neighborhood boss named Giancarlo Ricci. Ricci, an ex-boxer and a conscientious weight-lifter, was a regular coke user (though he scrupulously avoided heroin because of its deleterious effects on the physique) and in time De Negri became one of his favorite shake-down victims in his daily search for submission and cash. If De Negri offered the slightest resistance, tables overturned, yelping dogs went flying through the air, and De Negri himself would often receive a pummeling. One day, Ricci took a jack handle to the rear paw of a schnauzer that had just given birth to a litter of nine pups. As De Negri desperately tried to comfort the shrieking dog with a broken paw, Ricci made off with De Negri's stereo, selling it back to him the next day for a few hundred dollars. Ricci had no qualms about slapping De Negri around in front of his young daughter, Sara, seven years old at the time.

One day, Ricci noticed that a boutique selling designer clothing next to De Negri's dog-barbershop looked ripe for the picking. He persuaded, in terms we can imagine, De Negri to let him stay in the shop overnight, and recruited some local help to break down the wall with

picks and sledgehammers. The loot was reported to the insurance company as being worth over \$100,000; in fact Ricci received just under \$10,000 from the local fence. De Negri received a ten-month prison sentence. He did it, as they say, standing up, without mentioning Ricci's name. When he got out, he went to Ricci and demanded his share of the take. Ricci beat him up, and suggested that if he wanted more of the same, all he need do was ask again.

De Negri began to sniff coke himself. He became dour and irritable. His ten year marriage came to an end. He obsessively began to plan his revenge. He told Ricci that a drug dealer would be passing by the canine barbershop that evening, at the end of his rounds with wads of money. All that Ricci would have to do would be to hide in a dog cage in the back of the shop, and when the dealer showed up, surprise him with the cash.

Here, I am unclear on a detail, but once De Negri had Ricci in the cage, he somehow immobilized him, and strapped him securely to the dog trimming table. Between lines of cocaine, while



Ricci struggled with the straps and screamed threats, De Negri went to work on him with his clipping tools, and for seven hours he massacred the unfortunate Ricci. Snip, snip, snip went the clippers, while the deranged De Negri narrated the gruesome events to come, saying, "Do you know what *er canaro* is going to do next? . . ." Eyelids, ears, lips, fingers, nose, long strips of flesh were torn away, and when the bleeding became excessive, *er canaro* doused his victim with gasoline and lit it to cauterize the wound. I will spare you the final and truly horrible details, but there is one event that took place during the seven hours of torture and mayhem that is especially noteworthy and integral to understanding the Walter-Mitty-esque grandeur of this weird, oneric murder. Halfway through, De Negri changed his blood-soaked clothes, presumably asked his thrashing victim to be patient for a moment and *er canaro* would be back to finish

his shampoo and manicure. De Negri then walked to the nearby elementary school, took his daughter by the hand, walked her to her mother's apartment, and then returned to work.

Ricci's charred corpse was discovered the next morning, and De Negri was arrested immediately. He made a complete and unrepentant confession. You can imagine the headlines and the brief outburst of discussion about drugs and criminality. . . De Negri is now awaiting trial. La Magliana is the same, a suburban neighborhood where 60 percent of the kids are on drugs, in a city and country so rife with corruption that nothing is done to stop the flow of narcotics.

I look forward to hearing from you (a simple categorical no will be quite sufficient, but I do need to know at least that this letter has reached you, considering the efficiency of the Italian postal service).

Yours Sincerely,
Antony Shugaar

Why I Write

MONTANA -- Oh dear oh dear oh dear. Imagine being cooped up for one week in late August with more than 50 people who Want to Write. Everyone walked around carrying manuscripts (their own? each others?) that they seem to read seriously, all the time. It was the first annual Yellow Bay Writer's Workshop, on Flathead Lake 75 miles northeast of Missoula, Montana, and I just didn't get it; I thought Writers were supposed to be solitary beings. But here, I couldn't even go into the common bathhouse of the University of Montana's bio-logical research station taken over temporarily by what seems to be half of the Rocky Mountain states' teachers of English at the junior college level, without wanting to descant on Art and Life. At meals, it was even worse. Would be writers are talkers.

The first afternoon, at orientation, we were told to wear our nametags throughout the week because it would make things easier, even, as the director said, "for those of you that hate wearing nametags." Everyone laughed but me. It wasn't so different from when I was dragged to an EST introductory lecture; there, too, everyone was interested in your name.

Everyone asked, "what are you here for?" (meaning poetry or fiction). Much like a singles' party of the damned, everyone inquired about your credentials right off. Only in this case, it's ➤

your credibility as a Writer, not your solvency, sexuality, or appreciation of post-modernism that's under appraisal. Instead, it's have you published? Where? What? What semi-famous writer -- or more commonly, writing teacher -- has praised your work? Written a recommendation for you to a publisher? Or a graduate-school admissions committee? And if the encounter went well, it's not phone numbers that were exchanged, but promises to read each other's stuff. (I'll show you mine, if I can see yours.) And if true connection was achieved, it will become a long-term relationship: critique by mail.

Okay. So the instructors were Marilyn Robinson (*Housekeeping*) and Geoffrey Woolf (*Providence and Duke of Deception*) and Tom McGuane (*Ninety-Two in the Shade*) and poet Carolyn Kizer, whose stuff consistently shows up in women's studies. Richard Ford dropped by unannounced to hang out in the dining room the first night. Most of the guys in the workshop wanted to work with McGuane, he of the whiskey-wench-two-fisted adventure-cock-of-the-walk-macho-I-hang-out-with-Warren-Beatty mystique; to a man, the male student said "Oh yeah, McGuane, he's such a terrific writer." To me, it seemed more a question of will to power: they too hoped one day perhaps to have a beautiful wife, wear dope-dealer reflector glasses, and



hang out in Hollywood. There were morning workshops where student pieces were read and discussed. (I didn't think writers were morning people). There were craft lectures in the late afternoons, and readings by the instructors, and one night, by local writers, after dinner. It all brought out a long-dormant need for playing hooky, but there is little to get truant with, halfway between Polson and Kalispell --- unless RV camps, trailer parks, and convenience stores/bars abutting alcohol rehabilitation centers are your idea of a good time. About the only other entertainment possibilities were rock shops for sale and real estate developments subdividing former cattle ranches into the weekend getaway ranchettes. Unfortunately I wasn't in the market for either one.

And the writing. For the most part, a mixture of the truly cringeworthy and That-Which-Has-Been-Through-Too-Much-Creative-Writing. One attendee had a pseudonym. Another ended a story with a line. "You haven't started menstruating, have you?" Still another used the contrast between homemade and Pizza Hut pizza as the central metaphor of her story.

The first night I walked to one of the pay-phones and called home to San Francisco; there were no phones in our rustic Writers' cabins that were temporarily housing Writers and not limnologists through the grace of the university's

office of continuing education. I complained to my friend who was house sitting. "I feel like I'm at one of those Moonie summer camps. Every* one smiles so much and is so sincere." He advised patience and a lot of vodka. All the talk of prose and image had put me in mind of Hemingway, so I did, as a matter of fact, become friendly with the bartender who worked the cash bar every night. Writing is thirsty business.

-- Paulina Borsook

Shopping Frenzy

LOS ANGELES -- Some people were born to dance; me, I was born to shop.

It's an addiction I inherited from my mother. Mom firmly believed all problems paled with a purchase. The bigger the problem, the bigger the purchase.

As her marriage floundered she consumed designer bags, Italian shoes, Persian rugs, and investment antiques. She might have gotten more from a marriage counselor. She couldn't have gotten more from a store. Some kids know the marriage is over when Dad moves out. I knew when he can-celled the charge cards.

Like children of alcoholics, children of shopoholics are vulnerable to the same affliction. After all, it's a learned coping strategy. Or as the popular T-shirt claims, "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." My addiction didn't surface until I left college and moved to LA. Putting a latent shopoholic in Los Angeles is worse than turning an alcoholic loose in a liquor store. You're surrounded by temptation and everyone around you is buying up a storm.

There I was, new in town and lonely. The only familiar face was Saks Fifth Avenue. After all, had I not spent the better part of my adolescence sitting on a velvet chair watching Mom try on skirts? I didn't know how to get around the freeways, but I could maneuver through Saks blindfolded.

They welcomed me with open doors and a brown plastic charge card. What more could I want? In a capitalist society, getting your first charge card is like losing your virginity. A MasterCharge milestone. There's the same sense of achievement: of reaching adulthood. The same fear you'll get carried away and get into trouble. I ne-ver experienced a thrill like that first time. Except when I got my American Express card.

Now frankly, my first experience with Saks was more encouraging than my first experience with sex. . . Saks respected me the morning after I slipped out of Lingerie. And made sure I was completely satisfied. Why, I could call them whenever I was desirous, day or night.

Shopping is like masturbation. A way to get exactly what you want. When you want it.

So, why put up with frustration. Can't find a job? What the hell? You can always find a new sweater. Your husband ignores you? Big deal. Walk into your favorite boutique. The salesgirls will smother you with attention. Your husband will too when he gets the bill.

Anyway, Saks introduced me to all their friends. Neimann Marcus, Bonwit Teller, Gucci,

I. Magnin. People in LA may be aloof, but the stores let you visit from nine to nine. Even on Sundays. And they write you letters inviting you over for tea and designer sportswear. So you feel wanted and needed.

If only for your money.

At least it's better than being wanted or needed because you're a hot shot agent at William Morris, or have a miniseries in the works.

Besides, stores in Los Angeles really hustle for your money. Maybe it's the com-petition. But look at the windows they put on. The displays cost as much as the clothes. Christmas decorations are anticlimactic. Whenever the concrete reality gets depressing, you can escape to a well-merchandised shop. Los Angeles may lose its natural beauty in smog, but its artificial wonders glow constantly through a neon haze. How bad can life be when you're sipping espresso at Giorgio's?

I was bound to succumb. After all, Los Angeles is crazed with rabid consumers. There is a city wide fever to buy buy buy. Keep up your image. You are what you drive. Or what you skate. Bohemian beach bums boast hundred dollar roller skates. Secretaries spend half their wages on porcelain fingernails. Janitors wear Gucci belts.

If you want to be a star tomorrow, you've



got to dress the part today.

Or, as Mom would say, "Never buy cheap shoes because that's what you are."

It's very sad. The media worries about Americans abusing alcohol, cocaine, and marijuana, but they ignore shop abuse. Yet the disease is infectious, like herpes. Once you've got it, you're stuck for life. And does Sixty Minutes care? Of course not, they've got sponsors. With products in stores. So, the shopoholics are helpless.

If Diogenes were alive today, he'd be looking for a person under their MasterCard limit.

He wouldn't find him in LA.

I decided to go cold turkey. For six months I only shopped for groceries. But even the grocery stores in Los Angeles are tempting. I could choose between the Irvine Ranch market, the Gelson's, and Charmer's market. Get my kids searching for the perfect artichoke.

To cure my addiction I only shopped at Ralph's.

Well, in due time I decided I was rehabilitated. Shopping was no longer a thrill; it was a chore. Saved in the nick of time from being a shopping bag lady.

Smug and secure I was in control, I strolled down Melrose. It was a rainy Friday; I should have been home nursing the flu. I wandered into a funky boutique specializing in antique clothes. ➤