

James Kwapisz

The King Wah Chronicles

Part I: King Wah's Kitchen

Frank was very proud of himself. He would often boast about how much faster he delivered Chinese food than his friends, who also worked at the same low-grade take-out restaurant. The three friends had been working at Kin Wah Kitchen since their junior year of high school. Frank was the first to get hired, and he never let his friends forget how he'd gotten them their jobs.

The communication barrier between Frank's bosses and their off-the-books delivery boys often caused confusion. On one such occasion, Frank's bosses, having neglected to make a schedule for the week, figured it fit to call Frank, as well as his two friends, to ensure that at least one of their white-American drivers would come that day. They referred to each of their delivery drivers as "Okay," but only when orders were ready, and when the drivers would receive their pay at the end of the night—otherwise, conversation was almost always avoided. Neither the employers nor the employees knew the others' names, and neither party had any intentions of inquiring.

"Okay," Frank was greeted upon arriving first to the restaurant. The delivery order was to his high school, from which Frank graduated five fleeting years ago. Five years. The number registered in his head as he walked to his car. Parked next to his were his friends' cars—smoke billowed out of one as both its doors swung open.

"Shit. You're working today? Why'd they call us to come in?"

Frank opened his car door, put the bags of food on his passenger seat, and turned to his friends. "Beat you to it, boys." He shrugged his shoulders, walked over to the driver side of his car, got in and drove off.

Frank's realization of how much time had passed in such a seemingly short duration was beginning to stress him out. He wished he'd had time for some of his friends' spliff to calm his nerves. But the sudden remembrance of his reputation as the notorious druggie at his high school made him reconsider delivering Chinese food to one of his

former teachers high. He resolved to make it through this shift—or this delivery at least, he compromised—sober, so as to avoid fitting the burnout persona that his teachers had predicted he would never stray from. Frank did it all—you name it—in fact, he made it a ritual to tell his friends how many substances he’d tried each week. But his friends were—as they felt now about Frank’s trivial time-trial records—indifferent towards his weekly feats. For fear of their friendship, they could never break it to Frank how absolutely apathetic they felt about every milestone he measured his life by. And the worst part was that Frank knew they didn’t care; yet he could not stop himself from blowing his own horn whenever the opportunity arose.

“Delivering Chinese food?” Frank pictured his P.E. teacher saying. “I thought you’d be an Olympic ping-pong champion by now.”

Frank came to by a bombardment of bus horns. He found himself in the school bus circle. Hurriedly he turned into a faculty parking lot. “I’ll just leave my blinkers on,” he thought, “and a note, that I’m delivering food and I’ll be right out.” Frank reached into the brown paper bag beside him, grabbing the receipt from between the boxes of lo-mein and French fries. He read the address: Room 319. There is no third floor, Frank thought. That was *my* joke. It must be that wrinkled old Mr. Patersfeld. Figuring since his science teacher was the only instructor of his who had actually gotten seriously angered by the joke, Frank concluded that it must have been Patersfeld who ordered this delivery to get back at him, to humiliate him. To give his class a didactic display of the typical fate one is likely to have if they do not abide by the school’s drug-free policy.

I’m not going in there, Frank decided. On his way back to Kin Wah Kitchen he tried to conjure up some excuses to tell his bosses when they would ask him why he had come back without the customer’s money; then he thought about what he would tell his mother when he would come home without a job; then about how to convince her to pay his car insurance while he searched for another—but ultimately, a quick glance at an exit sign for the interstate was all Frank needed to plan his course of action. So, with the twenty dollars his bosses had lent him for change, and enough French fries, lo-mein, and spare ribs to last him the next couple of days, Frank set his sights West.

With open arms, his mother welcomed him home that very night.

Part II: Purgatory

Despite the supposed lack of communication with his bosses, Frank missed them when they left. He even considered quitting, thinking their sudden disappearance a good sign to finally move on and get a real job. But the thought of having to fill out those dreadful tax forms only to get paid *on* the books deterred him from this venture.

Frankly, he was hurt. They didn't even tell me they were selling the place, he thought. However, his resentment for them soon subsided as the new owners proved to pale in comparison with the old. No longer could he engage in the odd yet endearing secret language of gestures and short utterances that he and his former coworkers had developed over five long years together. Now he had to put up with the new staff's awkward, and often frustrating, adjustment period. Although the old bosses were debatably autistic, Frank now deemed their sacrifice of emotions for efficiency a good trade. Two nights in a row Mindy, the new counter girl, shortchanged him. He, of course, confronted her and demanded his deserved pay. He caught himself before he blurted, I thought you guys are supposed to be good at math, or something equally racist and impulsive. His friend Carlos, who also delivered for Kin Wah Kitchen for five years, had recently been fired for his frequent tardiness. With Carlos as their example, the new regime demonstrated that it would not tolerate any deviance.

At first Frank found it kind of Mindy to exchange names with him, but after some consideration he wished she hadn't. He liked not knowing his old bosses' names. Their perfunctory quirks and mannerisms defined them much more clearly than names ever could.

In truth, Frank showed no more outward happiness in the old days than in the new, but in retrospect he remembered his time with the old crew as "the good old days." In his nostalgia, the memories became sad and sweet and sepia-toned—such is the rendering nature of memory. He missed sharing smiles with the bossman whenever there was recognition that they were both on the same page about locations of deliveries or the favorable amount of pay each received when Frank would cash out at the end of a good night. He missed the bossman's impeccable accuracy in his calculations night after night. Most of all, he missed referring to the bossman as **Bossman**.

It was always a process when Frank had to piss while on the clock. The bathroom at the back of the restaurant was filthy and may have once been a torture chamber, thus was to be avoided at all costs. If it was dark enough outside, he would park his car in the far corner of the parking lot behind the restaurant and piss standing next to it, holding his phone out to fool any passersby into thinking he was not pissing in public but innocently texting a friend.

This scheme, however, was not always plausible—for instance, it would be too risky to carry out during the day. Thus there comes a day in every Kin Wah delivery boy's career, at least once, when he is cornered by the odds and must resort to using the deathroom. Frank, if the parking lot was off-limits, would usually stop home between deliveries, but one day one particular bladderfull could not wait the two-minute drive back to his house.

He asked Mindy if he could use the bathroom; she nodded and pointed to the back of the restaurant. So he skirted behind the counter, squeezed his way through the cooks on either side, slowing his urgent pace so as not to slip on the narrow, grease-lined lane of floor, inched around the metal can filled with mystery meat, and, using his shirt to turn the sticky knob, entered the bathroom. The bare bulb swinging from the ceiling shone a dim glow on the continually running sink, then on the brown-stained bowl, then on the sink, and so on in its pendulum. He, worrying his hand would have to be amputated if it made contact with the deceptively white porcelain, lifted the seat with his foot. The great relief of releasing the rushing stream within him did not last long—there was no flush handle, only a wet string that had to be pulled up by hand. No matter how much Frank disapproved of the new crew, he could not leave his dank asparagus-urine to just sit and fume there after they had been nice enough to let him use their bathroom, however hellish it may be. So he stripped the paper towel roll above the sink of its last remnant and used it to pull up the moist string.

Once liberated, Frank rushed outside to breathe some clean air. He walked around the building to the entrance, sat back in his seat, and tried to forget the whole experience. He stared down at his hands, making a vow not to touch his face until he could get home to wash them. His attention quickly strayed to the length of his fingernails.

Frank had no issue grooming himself in the eating area. His philosophy was that his fingernails, scattered about the floor by his table, were but honest warnings to customers of the restaurant's poor state of cleanliness. If people could see the back of this shithole, he thought, the fingernails would blend right in.

"That must not be good for business," said a customer, running his finger along the top of the refrigerator, marking the dust. Deep in his rumination, Frank had not seen the man walk in. Mindy just smiled and laughed, unable to engage in any form of conversation beyond what is required for regular transactions.

"You get one free can soda with order," was Mindy's response.

"Er, okay," the man muttered. He perused the refrigerator for a moment and decided on a Snapple.

Alarmed, Mindy shook her head and exclaimed, "No no no no no no, one free *can* soda with order."

"What if I don't want soda?"

Mindy smiled.

"I can't have this?" the man asked, annoyed.

Mindy shook her head, No.

The man paused to compose himself, then inquired, "How much is the can of soda?"

"One dollar."

"Okay. And how much is the Snapple?"

"Two dollar."

"Okay," said the man, his impatience curled in the grooves of his forehead. "So can I just give you an extra dollar and have the Snapple?"

"No," Mindy said mechanically.

The man was taken aback. He was appalled by the absolute stiffness of her logic.

"Well, you have an awful business here," he told her bluntly, as if he had been waiting to tell her so since he walked in. "I'm never coming back."

Mindy smiled.

As the man waited for his food, he fidgeted, tapping his fingers on the counter, looking over his shoulder out the storefront window then back over the counter to see if his

food was ready yet. It was as if the man were in a waiting room, counting the seconds until he would be called. It was as if he were in purgatory, Frank thought. The man's discomfort in this realm in which Frank found such comfort and ease struck Frank out of his daze of complacency. In each fidget Frank saw freshness, clarity.

“Any sauce?” Mindy asked.

“Er, uh—yeah. Duck and soy,” the man answered. “Please.”

Mindy nodded and threw some sauce packets in a brown paper bag which she then stapled shut automatically, like Frank had seen her and those of the old counter crew do countless times. The first bag stapled was no different from the next—it was as if Mindy was always stapling the same bag shut forever.

“Thank you, come again.” Mindy smiled.

The man grimaced, unable to return Mindy the expected smirk, and paced hastily out of the restaurant. On to start his new life, Frank thought. Resting his head in his hand, Frank watched on in admiration as the man got in his car and drove off into the big pink industrial suburban sunset.

Part III: Telempathy

I guess it was when my boss threw a raw rib at me that I decided to quit Kin Wah Kitchen. It was an awful misunderstanding.

Some vicious customer had called back to complain about how long he'd been waiting for his food. I had no idea there was even a delivery. In Kin Wah's defense, I was at home at the time, probably snacking or snoozing or whatever I used to do on my freely chosen breaks. Even so, they would usually call me five minutes before a delivery was ready.

—Please, do not be swayed by that presumed bias attached to the position of narrator: we were both wrong—

So whenever I finished eating, or awoke from the nap that may or may not have actually happened, I drove back to Kin Wah. I parked on Main Street in front of the restaurant—before I rolled up my window I heard, “You! You! You, stupid guy!” muffled through the shrinking gap. My boss motioned for me to roll down my window so he could put the overdue delivery order in my car. But he did not simply *put* the brown bag on my passenger seat; rather he just dropped it, so roughly that its contents spilled out on the seat and floor mat. And all he said was, “Okay, stupid guy. Hurry up, okay. And come back—another one, okay.” No apology, just scorn. Yes, *I* am the stupid one—they had lived in America almost four years at that point and still hadn't made any effort to improve their English, nor had they picked up on the simplest nuances of American speech and gesture. If they were content in their ignorant, robotic bubble—though I could never tell for sure as emotion seemed foreign to them—so be it; but I no longer wanted any part in it.

“What the fuck?” I impulsively blurted at my boss, as brown sauce spread across my seat and dripped to the floor mat and all over the trash that had accumulated there over months of laziness. But because he could not understand my words or the emotion packed into them, he simply retracted into the restaurant.

In the matter of a second a violent daydream—in which I brutally murdered my boss with my car key and proceeded to set his restaurant aflame with the other bastards locked inside—passed through my mind, and then I swallowed my goddam pride and drove off to make the delivery. On my way over to the address written on the fate-determining

ticket I wiped my seat with the napkins in the customer's bag and filled my car with the illogical screaming of my fiery rage.

The ticket said to go to an apartment complex by the train station—I obeyed. There were five or six buildings in the complex and I was in no mood to search and discern which one it was, so I called the customer.

“Hello?” answered an old, hoary voice.

“Hi, this is Frank, the delivery guy for Kin Wah Kitchen,” I sped through my regular, regurgitated introduction. “I just pulled up in front of Bellevue Gardens—I was just wondering which building your apartment is located in.”

“Wait, who is this?”

I suffered through the sickening repetition.

“Oh!” he said as if he had made some grand epiphany. “Well you go down Sullivan, then make a right on Ivy.”

“I know that, sir.” I began to feel physically ill holding in all that pent-up frustration. “I'm already here. But which building is yours?”

“Oh, well you just go down Sullivan—”

And there I had to hang up. In the privacy of my little car I let out a swell of wrath. After yet another instance of reaching out to my fellow man and receiving no help just more difficulty—sinking deeper into my indignant, self-reliant hole: my desire to utterly alienate myself from humanity—I searched and found his building. There were three doors to each building, and each door led to a certain numbered cluster of apartments. It was in the second door I tried that I found his apartment. The door was slightly ajar. I knocked. “Hello?”

“Come in. I'm in here.”

I was usually pretty sketched out about going in random people's houses, but I just wanted to get the delivery over with as soon as possible. So I walked inside and there was this long hallway with maybe seven or eight doors stemming off it. Confused, I peered in each, slowly making my way down the hall. “Hello?” I asked again.

“In here.” The last door on the right. I pushed it open and what did I see: a lanky, wrinkled, old man rising from his bed—stark naked.

“Um, your total is \$12.97,” I said automatically, unsure of what else to say—I thought perhaps he was a nudist.

“Hold me,” he said, extending his frail, varicose arms toward me.

Definitely not a nudist.

I’m not certain exactly what I said to him but I’m sure it was something along the lines of, Get the fuck out. Then I took his food and slammed his door in his face.

To be honest, I was scared. It was a strange combination of fear, anger, and shock. I was shaking. I had almost been molested (well, in the sense of the word synonymous with ‘to bother’ I guess technically you could say I had been molested)—either way, I felt violated and victimized by that creepy old man—his low-swinging, scraggly scrotum forever scarred in my mind.

“He no pay for food?” was all my boss’s daughter had to say after I explained to her the story. “Naked?”

“Yes,” I said for the third time.

And once she translated for her father and the other cooks what happened they all began to laugh, and my boss said, “Oh, ha, crazy? Crazy guy? Ha!”

“Yes.”

They even had the nerve to ask me if I wanted to buy the food. And, of course, I refused to participate in their heartless-because-overly-rational transaction. “Are you serious?” I said and went on giving them my attitude because I didn’t care that I was creating tension, making them uncomfortable—I just wanted them to feel *something*.

I stopped when an old woman entered the restaurant. She didn’t deserve the negative energy I was exuding. She was innocent.

So I sat down at my table and started writing in my notebook all the things I wanted to say to my inept employers. It was very therapeutic. I calmed down.

After the woman placed her order she sat in the seat across from me. Not knowing that the book was mine she picked up my copy of *Lolita* from the table and read the inner flaps and backside synopsis.

“Have you read it?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” she responded, a little startled. “But I am a big reader. I love to read.”

“Me too,” I said, and smiled.

After a year or so at Kin Wah I realized how much time I had been wasting just sitting in that same seat, waiting for a delivery—waiting for something. So I figured I would better utilize my idle hours reading and writing. I found the most solace in that silence. I wanted all to share in that transcendental realm of communication.

“You should read it,” I encouraged her. “It’s great. Though I’m only halfway in right now.”

For lack of anything concrete to add she just smiled in response. “It sure has an interesting cover.”

The cover was a close-up shot of a girl’s—presumably Lolita’s—lips. I laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s why I had it turned over. It’s a pretty weird cover. Not something I’d want to look at while eating Chinese food.”

We laughed.

“Hello,” I heard come from behind the counter. That was how my boss’s daughter would get my attention—Hello, not Excuse me, or even Hey, Frank.

“Hi,” I responded, holding out a stare with her, remaining in my seat, itching for a reaction in her. But there was none. I sighed and grabbed the bag off the counter.

“It was very nice talking to you,” I said to the elderly woman. “Have a nice day.”

“You too,” she said sweetly.

The delivery fortunately went smoothly. But when I returned to the restaurant *Lolita* was gone! That old, deceiving wench stole it from me. I couldn’t deduce it for sure, but I’d say it’s a pretty good goddam guess. I thought people were supposed to get nicer and humbler when they get older, what with losing their luster, pride, and dreams. Either I was horribly misled in my assumption or my hometown really had an infectious effect on all its inhabitants, the young punks as well as the old thieves and perverts. She claimed to be a ‘big reader’—well apparently she was not a *good* reader, because if she were she would have understood that the ultimate goal of literature is for people to learn human decency, goddammit!

“Did that woman take my book?” I asked my boss’s daughter.

“Huh?”

“That woman. She was just sitting right there.” I pointed to the table. “Did you see her walk out with my book?”

She looked very confused.

“Did she order here or pick up?” I asked, short of memory. “Because if she picked up can you find me her phone number?”

“She order here.”

It was then that I knew I would never see my *Lolita* again—at least not that copy.

“You don’t know her?” she asked. “I thought you know her.”

“No, why would you think that?”

“You were talking to her.”

I laughed. “No, that’s just something I feel compelled to do sometimes—you know, *talk* to other human beings,” my thoughts were flowing out of my mouth without filter. “Try it once in a while. Maybe then you’d actually care that the property of your employee-for-five-goddam-years was stolen.” I went on . . .

At that point I didn’t care much about the security of my job. I cared more about having my voice actually heard and bringing light to that grey, soulless restaurant and those who perpetuate its greyness.

Unresponsive to my vicious words, my boss pushed a 2-liter bottle of Sprite to my chest and said, “Lady call back. You forget soda.”

“You take the fucking soda back,” I told him. “I didn’t forget it, *you* did. I shouldn’t be responsible for your mistakes when you guys fuck up; I shouldn’t have to waste my gas, my money, my time—”

My boss kept interrupting me.

“No, no, you listen to *me*,” I told him, yelling over his frenzied, unintelligible banter. “You make the orders and I just deliver them. It’s simple. It’s nothing new. How are you still fucking up this much? Learn! Learn!”

He had no idea what I was saying but you could tell he felt the fire behind the words (I finally made him *feel!*). Yet he stubbornly kept pushing that damn soda bottle to my chest—and I lost it: I took the bottle and threw it over his head into the kitchen—soda spewing all over the floor, the grills, the cooks, the red mystery meat.

And that . . . that was when he threw the raw rib at me.

During my final few months at Kin Wah I sunk deeper and deeper into my inner recesses. I grew tired of people. I stopped going to bars after work or on my days off; I even stopped hanging out with my friends. I just read and wrote. I had to balance input and output—in the face of the abyss, I had to create. I felt pure, like some kind of renunciate.

Comfort and routine are toxic to the soul. Sure, working at Kin Wah afforded me both poisons, but I didn't feel like I was actually there—I was absent from the physical realm. I just went through the motions to get by in suburbia and the illusion of linear time it so insistently imposes on its well-to-do homeowners and their offspring. My keen sense of pattern recognition sourced my absolute apathy towards the material world and the surface dwellers cycling around in it. I needed to break that surface—I read Vonnegut, I read Bukowski, Faulkner, Huxley, Flannery O'Connor. They showed me that insanity is freedom—yet whenever I'd look up from their books I'd see square buildings, straight yellow lines, and the people who inhabit and roll along them at the same times of day, on the same days of the week.

I had lived in my Long Island suburb my whole life—I needed out. Luckily my friend Carlos, a fellow former Kin Wah delivery boy, was one of my few remaining friends who still talked to me despite my months-long alienation of them. Four years after graduating high school he decided to move upstate to attend a college in the Hudson Valley. He asked me if I would want to split rent with him and I, of course, said, Yes.

It was a small, isolated place snug in the mountains about fifteen minutes out of the town. The house was like a cabin but not quite a cabin, though it had enough rustic rigidity to it to make me fall in love with it. It was perfect. Rent was relatively cheap since we were splitting it, and utilities were included—the only downside was that it only had one bedroom. We shared it, divided it with the tattered red tapestry Carlos had hung on his bedroom wall at his mother's house shortly after he had discovered weed in the 10th grade.

I used most of the money I had saved my last several weeks delivering to pay the security deposit, and Carlos paid first month's rent. We needed jobs. He took up a dish washing job at a seafood restaurant and I—well I refused to do something I wasn't passionate about; if I did settle for dish washing or something equally degrading then the whole endeavor would have been for naught. So I scrapped together a résumé (which turned out to not be so impressive what with my five years of experience delivering Chinese

food off-the-books) and applied to a few magazines to edit or proofread or whatever they needed me to do. I hoped that my passion would be evident in my enthusiasm. I showed editors my poems, my short stories, but all their employees had their bachelors' and masters' degrees. In their eyes a piece of paper was apparently more valid than presence (flesh!) and drive. My work did not coincide with the editors' criteria. But I wasn't so upset once I read their magazines—how their rigid rubrics rung the pieces of their fervor. There were some good poems and stories and essays in there, I don't mean to generalize, but a lot of them didn't do much for me. I felt like I had read the material before. It seemed as if the writers had some preconceived notions of what it is to be a writer and, instead of letting it flow from them naturally, they churned out the same old clichés and unbelievably convenient plotlines. O, the mock-Hemingways, the mock-Woolfs, the Carvers. It was as if that leap towards their conception of a 'writer' was their downfall—as if they should have never left their own grounding at all. As if they should have stayed there and fully examined their environments and the people who inhabited them before making such ambitious ventures.

Most of the first month consisted of fruitless interviews and rejection letters. I kept myself busy and content reading heavily. Though only a month had passed it felt like I lived whole lives of many variations and wavering degrees, yet I rarely ever left my little hammock tied between two birch trees. Lifelong friends were made, bonds had been broken, places had been created, destroyed—the pages pulsed with life.

The more I read the more beautiful and intriguing the world around me became. This is the stuff books are made of, I remember thinking, sitting in my hammock sniffing at the first crisp autumn breeze of that year—a pinnacle moment to ponder death and life. Myriad tree-metaphor driven poems spilled out of me and filled my small notebook. I was happy. I had finally fallen into the perfect circumstances to fully immerse myself in the written word. I felt myself dissolving into the text—my inklings finally becoming inked on the page—I was pure consciousness, undaunted by bodily bounds, creating realms wherein other consciousness's could meet mine on some telepathic plane, free from formalities, a refuge of honesty beyond cultural constraints.

But when we were nearing the middle of the second month upstate and I hadn't yet made a cent Carlos grew annoyed with me. Each night he'd come home at around 10

exhausted, and instead of resting after his three classes and subsequent six-hour shift he'd have to put his pruned, dirty-dishwater hands to work at his easel for another two or so hours. His work was amazing—so lifelike you'd think his portraits were photographs from afar. It surprised me that he possessed such diligent focus to detail considering our past as lowlife-scumbag-potheads. Never once did I peer behind the red tapestry dividing our small room to see the silent virtuoso at work; I only saw the finished products. His process would remain a mystery to me. He stopped talking to me after the third and (my) final month in that cozy, leaf-bespeckled abode— Ah, but back to the middle of that second month: when my state of absolute contentment was dismantled and exposed as the grand illusion it truly was. Though I rarely saw Carlos during that time, I could read the resentment in his facial grooves and feel his anger welling beyond the tapestry, just brewing and brewing until one day he finally said it:

“I can't pay this shit alone, man. When are you going to get off your lazy ass and get a fucking job?”

I was stunned. He was right. All that time I thought I had been doing such good in my life. But the bubble I was so comfortable in spit me out, abandoned me—and how refracted, how distorted it seemed when removed from it. What a hypocrite I was! I, your narrator, the one who preached so vehemently about the point of literature, as if there were just one—and there I was freeloading while my good friend was sacrificing his leisure time to support and explore his passion. I was only a burden to his pursuit. I wasn't helping anyone. I wasn't being decent to anyone but myself, and further, I was hurting others. It was all theory and no practice. Even in the latter Kin Wah days I was selfish—whenever my boss or his daughter would so as brush up against my precious bubble I would lash out on them. It wasn't fair—I should have been more present. Perhaps then I could have empathized with them—if only I knew the true gravity of their situation, their struggles immigrating to this country, their tight financial state that kept them bound to their seven-day workweek, their miraculous will to stay here despite that pressure . . .

If only there were some translated transcription of their thoughts I could read to try and understand what was actually going on in their heads—what they actually thought about their moody delivery boy, privileged, who worked at his leisure while they slaved twelve hours a day every day to feed others—

I needed to be humbled, I needed penance—so I took up a dishwashing gig. Carlos had been promoted to a waiter, leaving the dishwasher/busboy position open. As much as he had come to despise my presence, he strongly encouraged me to take the job, mainly because he didn't want to pay the month's rent by himself. I couldn't ask him to spot me—I had to prove I wasn't just that bum in the hammock—though at that point I don't think he would've given me anything anyway.

Dishwashing relaxed me. The rhythm of it occupied me in the physical world, allowing a steady, controlled momentum to flow in my mind. It was cleansing, within and without. Much of my thought concerned the people I'd crossed paths with. The Kin Wah people, the old book thief, even the creepy naked man (somewhere deeply buried within the strange tangled forest of his being)—all possess that sacred inner core I so naïvely thought mine alone. Dish by dish I was crawling my way out of solipsism. But I could not disregard my conception of the inner life completely—rather I revised it, cultivated it anew with comparisons and contrasts to others'. No subjective perspective is pure, but by putting our little bubbled lives together in some living Venn diagram we can at least get a little closer to clarity.

In the third month I apologized to Carlos, several times, but each time he would brush it off and say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's cool, man," but I could tell he had no interest in actually resolving things between us. He was too involved with "becoming an artist," which naturally entails its own kind of egotism, what with the constant desire to have one's own original style—which is debatably an illusion: I believe style comes from dissolving the self in the amalgamation of others and creating something honest and true with the best of that clustered mess—real style stems from artists' ability to discern the best components with which to configure the whole of their works. Carlos would refute this notion: That's just *your* opinion, he would say, Not everyone needs to think like you. Yes, I agree, and that's the beauty of it! But to add 'I think' in every opinionated statement seems, *in my opinion*, redundant; it should be implied that the speaker is subject to his subjective experience and thus only has partial (or no) objective validity. Besides, if everyone thought like me I would lose all interest in people.

I grew to crave communication. Carlos, what with his antagonism, did not satisfy that craving, nor did the natural environment provide me any solace anymore. So I

abandoned my escapist mentality and moved into the city to immerse myself in the busy, beautiful-ugly sea of humanity, of crying and laughter.

I took the first job that would take me—assembling car radiators at an auto parts factory. Though one of the most monotonous, mechanical occupations I could have fallen into, my inner world thrived in juxtaposition. I surrendered my body to the human machine in acceptance of my part in it. For nine hours I work, present in each moment, and for nine hours I meditate, so when I am released into the world, born again each day, I can truly live and illuminate life in others.

I remember this one time upstate when I had gotten lost in the mountains: I felt genuinely connected to the natural world, the water coursing throughout, the trees growing ever upward—and for a while I wished I could stay lost; but then I grew tired with it all and all I wanted was to hug someone and close my eyes and just be there, together: that's how I want to always treat people, as if I had just come down from that mountain. Though there are times when I get discouraged and relapse into my generalized disdain for people and desire to escape to the country, I am comforted that such dichotomy is illusory: there is no division between love and hate, humanity and nature, good and bad—whether you're at the dip or the peak, it's all part of the same wave pattern.