

ALTGLEN'S GUILT

Altglen was full of guilt. Paralyzing guilt. It's not as if he'd murdered anyone or made obscene profits shipping arms to radicals in some foreign country. No, his guilt involved writing. Or rather not writing. He felt that neurotic compulsion of all writers, to get, well, published, to set his varied and voluminous ideas into his laptop and onto screens and pages of the Great Publishing Universe. But . . . he always defeated himself as soon as he sat at the keyboard, the various and voluminous ideas vaporizing into . . . umm, feelings. Inklings. Ponderings more likely to be captured by a butterfly net than specific words, concrete images, or stirring declarations.

And why couldn't Altglen write down these? He knew—knew!—it was simply on account he hadn't read enough. He'd gone to writing workshops and forums, taking in the pronouncements of the masters of the printed word. Invariably, they'd profess the Nos. One, Two, and Three Inviolable Rules: Read. Read! READ! Literary gurus posited that you surely must read a thousand words for each one you write, a thousand books for one you might be fortunate to create. But Altglen would get so discouraged he'd resort to clicking over to sites like ESPN and pore over analyses of that weekend's college football results.

He became expert at trying alternate approaches. When faced with the horror of a blank screen, he'd tell himself to do more research into the dream world of his subconscious, so he'd shuttle off to a nap. When he awoke he might mow the lawn, trim the hedges, or apply fresh

coats of polyurethane on the weathered fence. Alphabetize his wife's recipes, re-caulk the toilet, reorganize his how-to books on writing.

A glint of admission nudged him. "This isn't working, so what can I do? There's that thing we talked about the other day. I can almost see it. Arggh . . . what's it called? Ah, visualization." His wife said she saw it on an infomercial. Altglen himself didn't watch t.v. because he was quite aware what a time-sucking demon it was. A distraction from the real task at hand. "This visualization aspect will surely do the trick," he told himself.

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So he went to work visualizing, placing himself firmly in the specific settings of his desires. He saw himself in book signings at cozy Greenwich Village bookstores frequented by painters, off-Broadway actors, independent filmmakers. Inevitably they'd wear little berets cocked to one side, or heavy sweaters beneath knitted mufflers and topcoats from L.L. Bean. Maybe there'd be larger bookstores in LA, glassy and shiny—but nothing at gigantisauros monstrosities like Wal-Mart. O, and while in LA, there'd surely be agents and studio reps ready to talk turkey about adaptations. [Incidentally, you surely noticed the "O" there and not the more pedestrian "Oh." Isaiah or John the Baptist never introduced pronouncements with "Oh."]

The visualizations became more elaborate. While in LA, a producer would come calling. He'd have two starlets along, each one eager to take to his shoulder and gush about what an opportunity this would be. But, no, such visions did not include A-listers like Angelina Jolie or Jennifer Garner. I mean, c'mon. Get real. Hmm. Come to think of it, Jennifer Garner might do nicely after all. But Angelina? Nah; she's probably got too many projects going.

And, O yes, talk shows. Surely, to start out there'd be radio interviews, probably at some dim West Texas 1000-watter, seeking to fill in between commercials for Dr. Pepper and Dr.

Hurlbutt's Magical Toe Fungus Remover. But eventually reviews on NPR would follow, and full-hour interviews on *Fresh-Air*. Maybe even a two-part series there, you know, continuing the next day. Terry Gross's voice is so comforting and down-to-earth. And *then* the network talk shows. Not just cheesy Oprah Winfrey, so full of herself that she thinks her influence practically "makes" authors appear on best-seller lists. And what's with her own glossy magazine and her own freaking network? It's enough to make a real author want to revert to "Oh," instead of "O." Hah. What it would be like if she'd interviewed John the Baptist? Argh, this visualization is getting into some weird territory.

Where were we anyway? Oh, talk shows. Not so much the daytime ones, but late-nighters with the occasional oral reading, a supermodel in the next chair, cooing with such interest that she's leaning forward, giggling uncontrollably at a hilarious anecdote. Probably something about an architect whose wife's leaving him because he's so devoted to his work that he does nothing about the leaky roof in the kitchen or the toilet always running. Hmm. Maybe the supermodel is overdoing it a bit. So another Hollywood starlet instead. But to achieve an appropriately progressive viewpoint, the architect must be the wife who shows up the goofy husband because she's the one who tends to the roof and running toilet, while he sits around watching infomercials.

There'd be invitations to do readings at universities. Not big State U's and probably not any of the Ivies, but a few liberal arts women's colleges. You know, the ones in bucolic settings with rolling wooded hills, fall colors, a creek meandering beneath one of those little wooden bridges curving gently up and then back down. And inside the tall-windowed halls would be English majors sitting in their turtle-rimmed glasses and their intent (but pretty) faces on fists, pondering the deep structure and psychological (or is it psychotic) symbolism therein. Ah-haa!

one says to herself: the perfect topic for my capstone project.

But these scenes would not be confined to liberal arts bastions. There'd be engineering schools, large halls of glass and exposed steel beams, serious-faces mellowing into little smiles long-suppressed by the vagaries of trigonometric functions and Thermodynamics III. Perhaps one student might be moved to a courageous decision to change majors, marching into the Office of the Dean of Mechanical Engineering, a foreboding man with a heavy southern accent,

The student, timid at first, says, "Sir, I don't think I'm cut out to be an engineer."

"Oh," the learned one says, peering up from a sheaf of resumes from potential Thermodynamics III professors. This prelude to stirring dialogue prevents her from noting further details in his four diplomas on the wall, two apparently from Georgia Tech.

"Yes, sir. I want to transfer to liberal arts. I want to be a writer, sir. Besides I'm having so much trouble with calculus. I made a 13 on my first test."

"Well, my dear, it would behoove you to apply yourself more aggressively. It's simply a matter of re-doubling your efforts."

A tear might well up in the young engineer, but she would turn away and attempt to redouble her efforts. She would review entire chapters, re-do homework problems, assemble tutors and study groups, even change the batteries in her graphic calculator. And keep fresh ones in her purse.

Her next test is returned: another dismal failure. She fights back another tear. She becomes utterly stultified by the grainy images in her head from the black-and-white 1968 film played the previous semester by her Intro to Engineering prof: a suspension bridge in Oregon or Utah twists and gyrates as if comprised of balsa wood and string, instead of steel and thick cables—all because of incorrect calculations by a structural engineer.

Well, she marches past the four startled Dean of Engineering secretaries, directly into Dr. Georgia Tech's office and makes her proclamation.

"Sir, I redoubled my efforts and my next calculus test was a 48. The world undoubtedly will be safer if I write novels and naturalistic poetry instead of designing suspension bridges."

"Very well, miss," the learned one concludes, and he signs her Change of Major form.

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For Altglen the visualizations became so intoxicating he could not avoid re-approaching his couch for more naps. But the guilt snuck up and bashed him over the head, as if the nun from 4th grade had become so enraged at his sluggardly ways she'd wielded not a mere twelve-inch ruler but a two-by-four. He knew this engineer-turned-novelist really had nothing to do with him. Then again, maybe it had everything to do with him, a warning to get on the stick and churn out some writing. But, Oh!—or O!—he still had done no reading of any kind. He heard the voice of Sister Agatha (the nuns always had impossibly weird names like Cleantha or Dimphna, or male ones like Cletus Marie or Alphonsus Madonna), practically shouting to him.

"Altglen Xavier McGillicuddy! Turn your book right-side up and read, sir!—or I'll have you kneeling in the corner."

O, how he dreaded that hard Catholic school floor. Once, Sister Agatha hinted at placing grains of uncooked rice under their knees. She got the idea out of one of those Viet Cong torture manuals from the war.

So none of these measures moved Altglen to actually read: not hortatory outbursts of the nuns, nor visualizations of success leading to fawning from delectable women in various degrees of undress, nor the literary voices from podiums real and electronic urging him to read more (even if it would be their own marvelous volumes). No, poor Altglen simply read not.

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One bright spring morning in the lushly wooded park on the far side of town, Altglen decided to sit on a nice bench and take in the soothing sights and sounds of nature. After all, Thoreau and his Transcendentalist friends found inspiration from nature's font and penned timeless profundities.

"Read not the times," Henry David urged, "read the eternities."

Thus Altglen put down the *New York Times* he'd been tempted to buy at a newsstand. He headed off to the park bench. Of course, to get there he had to drive in cross-town traffic, his '78 Dart spewing bluish smoke from an engine that needed a ring job after four years of neglect.

Once ensconced on his bench, a solitary sprite of a little girl approached from the see-saw, a large colorful book in her hand. No complementary partner had been present for her, so, ignoring her mother's warnings to not talk to strangers, she sought out the man sitting dreamily on that bench as if he had nothing better to do. (Rest assured, he had no inkling to read nor write one jot or tittle of anything this day, at least not in the near future—or even distant future. How could he have such an inkling, with his regard for ink more as poison rather than the writer's lifeblood?)

The little one's mother wore five-inch stilettos. One might be tempted to regard these as rather improbable in a park setting. Yet consider the inordinate number of blockbuster spy thrillers featuring long-legged heroines sprinting past exploding buildings, crashing helicopters, and attacking robots programmed to wreak destruction on attractive women in heels, usually blonde, holding hands with their accompanying male hunks of handsomeness. Said mother was at this moment absorbed in talking to a handsome stranger, off at another bench, a secluded one on the park's nether side, beyond the monkey bars and near a wooded thicket. That

distinguished gentleman sported a tweed jacket, replete with the requisite elbow patches that labeled him an English professor, probably of naturalistic poetry or the modern novel. The wooded thicket would soon come in handy for the professor and the mom, the tweed jacket adroitly folded to provide tender comfort for the dear mother's head.

But, ah, the little girl, a delightful creature of perhaps four years, adorable curls, and a dimpled chin, plopped herself down and opened her volume. She sat approximately four and three-eighths feet from Altglen. When he turned with impetuous interest in the young reader, he noticed she was uttering words that had little relation to either the title or images on the cover, which contained a most desperate father with a crown on his head, in some pose of request to one daughter who practically ignored him. In the background two other daughters essentially leered at their sister, the two of them obviously seeking favor from Dad, while the other sister couldn't be bothered in the least.

Yet, the little dear muttered something about birds transforming into attack helicopters and plowshares into swords. Thus, Altglen could not help himself.

"That seems quite an interesting book you have," he said.

"O, yes," the adorable sprite said. "My mother just bought it for me."

"Oh. Would you perhaps like if I read some of it to you?"

"O, would you, please?"

Altglen was struck by her manners. A little one who has obviously been raised by attentive parents, ones who've imparted to their children the transformative powers of the simple word *please*.

"Why nothing would please me more," he said. He scooped roughly two and thirteen-sixteenths feet toward her. She in turn moved closer and, not quite touching him, handed over

the volume.

Altglen cleared his throat and began with the title: “*The Daughters of Good King Lear*, by Wilhemina Spearshaker.”

He proceeded with the story of Lear wanting to retire, to permit his daughters to divide the kingdom's responsibilities so he could sit back and coast. The sitting back and coasting part struck Altglen. This, he realized, was exactly what he himself wanted. He could have others do the reading and writing for him. He could serve best as consultant, approving this or that in a story, but of course still have his name as the author because it was, after all, the very name that sold books.

(Altglen would have you dear readers know this great truth: Publishers find it so much easier to promote known entities, instead of the inherent risks with unproven writers. After all an *Author* is a *writer* who is published. Anybody can be a *writer*, Altglen said to himself, again. Those reminders'll pay off.)

Altglen was about to formulate an observation in his busy head about this story lacking character development, that the action was too rushed. However at this point the mother rushed forward in a panic. Her agitated condition was not because of the remnants of leaves and wrinkles on her snug-fitting dress that she'd failed to smooth over once her exercises with the professor had been completed, but rather on account of her precious daughter yakking up some not-so-perfect stranger. Certainly not a stranger who was handsome in the fashion of the learned professor, now lingering behind the concerned mom.

Before we take note of the responses by the mom to Altglen's too comfortable proximity to the little tyke, let us consider his deeper thought processes.

At first Altglen didn't see the mother stalking toward them, absorbed as he was with his

list of improvements for the story. What caught his attention, reeling him back to reality, was sighting the elbow patches that clearly revealed—announced—the wearer's literary bent.

“Ah,” Altglen realized, “just the moment to assert my expertise as literary consultant.”

He also sensed that an astute declaration of his guidance in the young girl's development as a discerning reader would head off any possible suspicions that might emanate from the agitated woman in heels, surely the child's mother.

“While this tale is certainly appealing,” Altglen began, after clearing his throat, “it reminds me of a weakness that another writer, William Shakespeare, frequently exhibited. Namely an over-reliance on soliloquy to develop his characters. And to this he too often intermingled all kinds of swirling action to keep entranced the ill-versed masses in the audience. This deprived his works of the more impressive literary cache they could've otherwise enjoyed.”

Nearing the bench, the mother eased into less fervent steps. The professor narrowed his eyes. Altglen scarcely noticed and pressed on.

“I would be so bold as to suggest the insertion of a story within the story. The play's the thing. Perhaps there could indeed be a play involving the king's wife, the queen, who fails to attend to one of her daughters by nubbing up to a sophisticated suitor instead of a more deserving newcomer who ultimately has the daughter's best interests at heart.”

Altglen had no intent of absorbing any sort of affections or commitment from this woman. He sought only literary admiration not a relationship of any sort, sexual, platonic or otherwise. He already had a wife, a not-so-happy one, and so he knew that as one too many entanglements. Hmm... that Plato fellow, he had the right idea, platonic relationships. Not that Altglen would read him.

Thus Altglen was not in the least interested in copulation. That would simply not do.

Ah, he figured, the only relationship to seek is with readers. Check that: one reader at a time. He, the author, would set on the page the ideas to make readers swoon with longing or passion or some kind of desire to copulate with him, the author. Of course, not literally. The only *literal* involved would be these magnificent sentences and passages, you know, composed of letters. There's your literal.

So Plato didn't quite have it right. Sure, the nonsexual—non-copulative, if you will—is the way, but to have it go to the truly sublime, to be all it could be, the ultimate relationship would be to inspire the reader to transport her/himself into oneness of spirit through the medium of words and ideas, on page or screen. Ah, yes. That's it. Oneness of spirit through words.

Never mind that by now the mother had grabbed her daughter by the arm and stalked off in her heels, not quite as hurriedly as the spy-heroine from the clutches of demonic robots. The professor? He guffawed, then slinked back toward the secluded bench near the woods for a post-coital nap.

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“Oh—ermm, O—but there's still the matter of not writing,” Altglen's guilty voice reminded him. So what to do? Instantly the voice responded: “Read.”

O! Of course! That. Then Altglen had the big idea: procure a Frequent Reader's Card for the bookstore at the mall. He knew—knew!—doing so would surely open the gateway for him to read more, and then to write. Plus he always gave books as presents, since that helped further enshrine him into the brotherhood of *Authors*. He'd be promoting their works, and Karma would thus move others to buy his, for one does not live in a vacuum. He visualized the book-buying public mobilized to drink from his own font, that concentrated nourishment in the form of a mother's literary milk.

So the Reader's Card, the visualization, the delving into his rich subconscious by active dreaming—with such tools of inspiration, how could he not be on the sure path to publishing?

O, but he wasn't. No words flowed onto any page, electronic, ink on paper, not even concentrated milk onto a floor or paper towel. Not even into a trashcan. He spent no hours at a laptop hammering away and then revising. No scrawling on any pages in furious desperation, only to wad them back up and toss them onto a now-burgeoning pile.

Altglen decided with finality to head for the bookstore . . . but first he had to ready himself. He wasn't sure what it was, but he must prepare in some way to take this step. But what? How to carry out this preparation? Nap? Visualize? Search for football analyses from another week's games? Read some Shakespeare? Plato? An engineering tome elucidating the properties required for effective heat transfer according to the Three Laws of Thermodynamics (as, of course, probed ever deeper in Thermodynamics III)? No, that would be beneath him. Thermodynamics? Hah. Let the thermodynamicists deal with that. (He paused: would that term require a capital T?)

He considered a trip to the grocery store to pick up vegetables for his wife. Not the neighborhood grocery. Probably the chic one at the suburban mall, with exotic kale, twenty-seven varieties of organic Chilean cucumbers, eggplant flown in from Argentina, bananas grown in Africa because not only did those have greater disease resistance, but they provided much-needed economic stimulus to desperate banana planters and the army of their small children to harvest the precious fruit, thereby saving costs. One does not live in a vacuum, Altglen knew, and 'tis family that helps one avoid such vacuums.

In the mall parking lot, an unexpected distraction, delightful in the extreme, forced Altglen to forego his grocery store plan. He'd parked at a spot, roughly the equivalent of a block

from both the grocery and book stores. Just as he emerged from his '78 Dart, a vision of long lovely legs below a wondrously brief miniskirt flowed past in direction of the bookstore.

“Ah, I think the vegetables can wait,” Altglen surmised. “Besides, that Reader’s Card is something I should no longer put off.”

After hurrying inside, he found the legs had disappeared. (His viewpoint of the feminine apparition had ventured no higher than her hemline; he didn’t know if she were blonde, brunette, blue-haired, or bald.) He shrugged his shoulders and headed for the customer service kiosk. There he was about to inquire about his ultimate prize, the Card—but an even more intense distraction rendered the last half of his question unintelligible.

“Can you help me get a . . . ugbu . . . gogbo . . . mig . . . dba?”

Before him stood The Ultimate Distraction, a redheaded blue-eyed creature of such sultry loveliness that Altglen completely forgot the long-legged miniskirted one who’d captivated him perhaps sixty seconds earlier.

“Those eyes,” he thought, “and those . . .”

She turned toward him in such a way that accentuated portions of her considerable curvature. This sent his mind reeling. The long-legged visions, vegetable shopping, plans for the wife, images of the high-heeled mom—all these were gone.

He recovered his voice, asked for a Reader’s Card application, and, once he’d filled it out, exercised the temerity to affix a note that he’d fashioned into a marvel of Twenty-First Century literary expression. In a single compound sentence, fourteen words, he’d remarked upon the blueness of her eyes, asked her to lunch, and professed his deep appreciation for modern literature and high cheekbones. He studied her nonverbal reaction to the note, noting her nametag, *Mallory, Assistant Manager*, proud of himself for not staring at the womanly curves in

the area of that lucky nametag.

Alas, Mallory suppressed a sneer and, after a few keyboard punches, wordlessly handed over a card and turned to her previous duties. The humiliating silence was deafening to Altglen. His exit could not be swift enough.

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Visualization is an absurd failure, he told himself. So is the so-called inspiration from nature's font. Thoreau and the Transcendentalists, Plato and his Platonics, the Thermodynamicists, dreams as gateway into subconscious truths—all of these had been colossal absurd failures. He was now slapped against the reality of how imposing was the Wall of Absurd Failure that surrounded him. He'd written nothing (except the marvelous but ineffectual fourteen words), and read nothing. Even mustering infidelity against his wife was an absurd failure. Make that an abysmal failure.

He headed for his '78 Dart, struggled to insert and then turn the key to unlock it. *Unlock it?* he wondered. Who would be tempted to even *look* into such a vehicle, never mind stealing it or any contents therein. He realized a pair of diamond earrings, had he ever been moved to purchase such an extravagance for his wife, or the sultry bookstore manager, would be safe in his steel vault of a '78 Dart. He secured his seat belt and cranked at the engine.

Alas, it failed to start. On he cranked and on the engine whined, at first in a fury and vigor that mocked Altglen, and then less and less stridently. The dashboard lights flickered dimmer and dimmer, no matter how determinedly he persisted and how hard he pivoted to place his entire upper arm and shoulder into turning the ignition. Disgusted, he yanked the keys from the steering column, got out of the car, and slammed the door with vehemence. The drawstring of his windbreaker caught in the door. The only good news there: he hadn't bothered to lock it,

so reopening it was a not the difficult enterprise of fifteen minutes before. He pulled tight the now-liberated windbreaker and re-slammed the door. A piece of side molding fell from the door, a small cloud of rusty dust pillowing upward. Altglen was tempted to hurl the keys of the '78 Dart into the nearby stream that meandered next to the parking lot (not as bucolic as the one on the campus of the liberal arts college). But he recalled, just in time, that his house key was on the same ring.

He shoved the keys into his pocket and turned to pace down the street. He was not at all sure which direction to take. A small girl whizzed by on a pink bicycle; she was perhaps a year older than the sprite. She barely avoided the dejected man who'd taken unsteady steps from a ridiculously old car out into the middle of the street. Altglen hopped to dodge her and thus stepped into a pothole and collapsed to the pavement. A car swerved to bypass the manheap in the street. Thanks to the pothole, Altglen's right foot had nearly sheared itself off at the ankle. Pain shot through his leg, up the torso to his spine. The car did not stop; in fact, the driver practically impaled herself on her horn in attempt to notify the man of his inconsiderate obstruction of traffic.

Altglen struggled to his feet; the effort to reach the comparative security of the sidewalk was practically a superhuman exercise. However, a headphone-bedecked skateboarder approached, congratulating himself that he'd finally heeded his mother's advice to keep to sidewalks rather than the chaos of the street. Four traffic citations in three months will improve a teenager's attention, especially since the mother had made him pay for all four tickets, even though his four-wheeled device shared no other characteristic to an actual automobile.

Alas, the skateboarder, while flicking the switch at his ear to change tracks (from the Deaf Lepers' "Violet Violence at Drainage Ditch #132" to "Skyscraper Zirkonia" by the

Phosphorescent Brassieres), he crashed into Altglen, already a bloody limping mass of strained tendons, knee and elbow abrasions on the right side, torn 100% cotton permanent press trousers (formerly cream colored but now combined with a deep asphalt gray and tire black) and a windbreaker, also torn, but with a comical imbalance of drawstring lengths. The skateboarder, terrified of a fifth ticket, spun to his feet, and snatched up his board from the sidewalk, refusing to be distracted by the man's thoughtless defacing of the artistic Phosphorescent Brassieres decal he'd lacquered on the day before. The teenager flashed away as fast as his feet could carry him. It is difficult to sprint six blocks while carrying a defaced skateboard, but he managed.

Altglen, however, sat on the sidewalk staring, safely out of vehicular traffic—if not that of two- or four-wheeled recreation equipment. Karma, though, proves an uncaring bitch, for in the very next moment, as he struggled to his feet, an earbudded yoga instructor, desperate to make her three-forty-five class, wheeled her three-year-old in a jogging stroller (three-wheeled, not two or four) and grazed Altglen's previously untouched left knee. He was spun around to his left approximately sixty two degrees, the precise equivalent of the complementary angle of a right triangle for which the Pythagorean Theorem yields a hypotenuse of 3.28 meters. Give or take an inch, which Altglen was not willing to do at this moment, and, further, the imprecision of which would be unacceptable in any modern novel but perhaps permitted in naturalistic poetry. But never a Shakespearian sonnet.

Now resigned to yet another crash from the heavens, Karma, the universe, Fate, the Great Speckled Yak, or whomever might be running things, Altglen tottered dizzily off the concrete and onto the hard ground next to the sidewalk. Not much softer than the road, he thought, but an improvement.

Ah, but what the poor fellow failed to see, at first, was he'd tumbled smack into a nice

thick pile constructed by some of the most determined creatures on the planet in terms of building and rebuilding: fire ants. Altglen sat a few seconds, then shook his poor head in a manner similar to Wile E. Coyote after the Road Runner had foiled again another attempt to use some Acme invention toward the latter's destruction, leaving the Coyote to dash back to the drawing board.

Altglen, though, had no drawing board, real or metaphorical, a truth that mattered not a whit once several of the angry ants made their displeasure felt. Instead of tending to his woozy head, Altglen leapt from the ant pile and screamed to the heavens, an explosion of sound violent enough to pierce through the yoga instructor's buds. Her grazing of Altglen in the previous 1.37 seconds had not been enough to cause her to change course nor entertain the slightest notion of turning to take notice of any additional havoc she'd foisted upon him. However, the disruption of earbud production did force her to stop, thrust off her buds, and furiously shake her head (in the manner of the Coyote, of course). If she noticed a bedraggled creature leaping to the sidewalk behind her, she gave no indication. She warily reasserted her buds, said a soothing word to her three-year-old, and jogged on, her son's wails persisting, while those of Altglen behind her began to slightly diminish, the Doppler Effect taking effect. At least from her locus.

From Altglen's locus, Doppler's effect was non-existent. For he, Altglen not Doppler (since the latter would likely remain peacefully resting in his place at a cemetery in Landover, Maryland, no matter how strenuous Altglen's screams), now flung himself from sidewalk to roadway, rubbing and scratching himself head to foot, as if he had the frantic fingers of six, eight, or ten hands and not two. The ants flew off from him, but the effects of their poisons did not. Altglen screamed and scratched down the sidewalk—apparently oblivious to the pure appropriateness of having a cemetery located in a town named “Landover,” since the very land

over each corpse, including Doppler's, would certainly enhance the peace and serenity their loved ones had prayed for at funeral services performed there.

At this juncture the sidewalk proved to be a safer one, now that no other wheeled demons careened at him. Still, through all his screaming and scratching, he managed to exhort himself to be on the lookout for some out-of-control unicyclist, roller blader, motorcycle gang, or other crazed entity on wheels. Or perhaps others flying through the air: frisbee golf discs, hula hoops, or unmoored catamaran trailers. He now knew—knew!—some Wile E. Coyote would surely come hurtling from the stratosphere while clutching a concrete block thrusting downward toward a crash landing upon Altglen's wracked head. Stranger collisions had already occurred in the past three and a half minutes.

Altglen, dimly aware of the current world record time for the mile run, currently held by Hicham El Guerrouj of Morocco (three minutes, forty one seconds, give or take a few hundredths), sensed that even without proper training, he, Altglen, could now threaten Mr. Guerrouj's noble record.

His thrashing, screaming, and scratching endured more than four minutes and forty one seconds and therefore took him nearly a mile down the street. By this time the effects of the ant toxins had slightly abated. Plus, from endorphins released in Altglen's system, mostly from his wild running, he'd passed another earbudded mother's stroller several hundred yards back. He slowed to a controlled jog then a walk. He stopped to rub the effects of an ant bite behind his ear. He looked up. What he saw made him freeze. No rubbing or scratching now. No moans from the various bashings he'd absorbed.

He'd strayed into an unfamiliar neighborhood. A neglected one in which stood a neglected public library, and it was this that he stood before.

It's not the classy bookstore with the hot babe of an assistant manager, he told himself. He knew this place surely had no cozy espresso café, no trendy jazz over a stereophonic surround sound system, no deep cushioned lounge chairs. He had the Frequent Reader's Card, but such was of no consequence here.

Still, Altglen forged toward the library entrance. He deigned to go inside. Several lights in the place struggled to exude little more than a dim glow. A fluorescent buzzed in one corner. Since its flickers gave the brightest, if not sustained, illumination in the building, Altglen approached that area.

The children's area. He let himself crumple to a patch of floor where rats had not eaten the thin carpet. Altglen reached for a selection he recognized from a more comforting moment of that morning. He had been deprived of learning the full plot of *The Daughters of Good King Lear*. Instead of turning Wilhelmina Spearshaker's story to the point of interruption, he opened the first page and began reading in earnest.