

THE CRY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN BADGER

by David Alpaugh

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©2011 Publication Scene4 Magazine

**Published as formatted by the author in the May 2011 issue of *SCENE4 Magazine*
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Cat meows, loud and urgent.

Flick of switch as someone turns on stereo.

Volume up on overture to Bach's "Suite #1 in C Major" until cat meows are overwhelmed.

Enough music to impress autumnal motif, then nervewracking sound of stylus skipping across record, cutting music abruptly. A very loud cat meow.

ARTHUR MCMANUS (*shouting*): Archimedes! You've ruined the record. Get down and keep quiet! (*Lowering voice.*) Our loving landlord Chester Alexander will soon be by to sign the new lease. Do you want to end up out on your ear? (*Footsteps heard approaching in distance. They dim and fade as McManus seals his apartment.*) Plan 326:A: We're not at home. (*Sudden burst of energy.*) First the lights! (*Sound of switch.*) Then the shade! (*Sound of shade.*) And the drapes. (*Sound of drapes.*) The night-creating shades and darkling drapes so drear... (*falling into reverie*) drear... drear.... (*A cat meow.*) Shhh! Archimedes! Even at this moment Alexander is camped without our gate and the evil hour is upon us.

The following conversation is overheard from inside the apartment by MCMANUS and listener.

MR. CHESTER ALEXANDER: A very prosperous good morning to you, Mrs. Shithead.

MRS. AGNES SHITHEAD (*matronly tone*): Why, Mr. Alexander, how ever have you been? My hubby and I mentioned your name at breakfast this morning, and we remarked how remarkably little we've seen of you lately.

MR. ALEXANDER: And I fear you'll be seeing less and less of me as the year proceeds.

MRS. SHITHEAD: That's not a principle, I hope?

MR. ALEXANDER (*laughing*): You mean like Archimedes' Principle of Displacement or Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle? No, it's nothing more than these tenants of mine, keeping me up nights and running me to rags days.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Have you acquired more buildings then, Mr. Alexander?

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, a few. Thirty-six now, if you count the warehouse. More than double what I started with when father passed away. But it's not the buildings. Never delude yourself (and never allow your husband to believe) that it's the buildings. (*Dramatic pause.*) It's the *tenants*, Mrs. Shithead—the *tenants*, I say. They are not what they used to be.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Of course I wouldn't have any way of judging, Mr. Alexander, with no tenant other than poor old Miss Enderby to go by—and that disgusting lover of hers, Otis Babcock, when he's on what my hubby likes to call his "woman binge." You'd think there'd come a time in a man's life when he could look at a poor crippled biddy, lying flat on her back, her breasts all covered with pocks and scabs, her nose running green snot, and her mouth dribbling like Niagara, and say to himself: "Now it's high time for all this SEX-U-AL nonsense to cease." You'd think that, Mr. Alexander, being a gentleman, but not Otis Babcock, oh no, not he...

MR. ALEXANDER (*impatiently*): But we were talking about *my* tenants, Mrs. Shithead. I assure you, they've changed, emphatically, and for the worse. Take Arthur McManus in there, if you insist on an example.

MCMANUS: Here we go, Archimedes.

MR. ALEXANDER: Been a model tenant these thirty-five years, McManus. Always put his garbage in a double-lined shopping bag and stapled it shut—*stapled it*, mind you. And while his wife, Mandy was alive, whenever the toilet became clogged (as toilets *are* wont to do) they'd take care of it themselves without so much as a word to me and with nothing more in the way of plumbing tools than a plunger and a coathanger. (*Confidentially.*) A badger got stuck down there once. (*Darkly.*) You may recall. It made the local papers.

MRS. SHITHEAD: I remember it well. My hubby always said they put the badger down there themselves, just to get the publicity.

MR. ALEXANDER (*bluntly*): Your hubby was wrong. But back to McManus, who now, in his time of yellow sere, does something so unlike the tenant of old that one can only wonder at it. (*As if reading a newscast.*) August twenty-first. An animal appears on the doorstep. McManus puts out a saucer of milk and a can of sardines. (*Pause.*) August twenty-second. The animal scratches and whines and will not go away. (*Dramatic pause.*) August twenty-third. (*Climaxing.*) Shortly after dawn McManus opens the door (*my door*, Mrs. Shithead!) and takes in a big fat ORANGE tomcat!

MCMANUS: You'd think the offense lay in your color, Archimedes.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Excuse me, Mr. Alexander: Did you say *tomcat* or *badger*?

MR. ALEXANDER: I said *tomcat*, Mrs. Shithead. (*Lowering voice.*) The badger remains in that toilet to this very day. We were none of us able to get the thing out, you know. (*Turning back to original subject with relief.*) Anyway, it states right in the lease—in *boldface*, mind you (I selected the font myself and after thirty-five years you'd think McManus would know the contents by heart) that no animals of any kind may be kept on these premises. *Why I don't even allow parakeets!* But something's gone haywire with that

man. And it's the same with the whole lot of 'em! (*Pause.*) You don't suppose it's all the radiation from these cell phones we've been reading about? You can't tell me they can take nature into their hands with impunity! (*With great emotion.*) Ruining my beautiful homes and apartments. (*Indignantly.*) Holding their lousy wife-swapping parties, smashing whiskey bottles on the balconies, littering the lawns with beer cans, riddling my walls with a million nails to hang their wretched photos of Miley Cyrus and Justin Bieber! Running roughshod over my sofas, ripping the upholstery to shreds, staining the mattresses—the men with their god-awful semen, the women with their slimy black menstrual sauce—and all the time clogging up the sinks and toilets with their hair and toenails and cigarette butts. *It's terrible, Mrs. Shithead, terrible!* Why a man's got to be out of his mind to ply a landlord's trade these days with equal opportunity what it is and property taxes so outrageous. They *eat* and they *fart* and they *expectorate* and they *menstruate* and they *defecate* and they *masturbate* and they *fornicate* and they run the poor apartments to the devil!

MRS. SHITHEAD (*politely*): They certainly sound like an energetic bunch! I suppose my hubby and I should be thankful for poor old bedridden Miss Enderby. But I hope you don't fancy yourself traipsing through all this merde unattended, Mr. Alexander, for your followers are numberless. Why many an evening at twilight time, Mr. Shithead and I sit, rocking back and forth on our porch swing, and we say...

MR. SHITHEAD (*sound of porch swing*): Agnes, I often wonder how poor Mr. Alexander manages all those *tenants* of his. If they were my responsibility I'm sure I'd just roll myself up like so many square yards of frayed carpeting and retire to the attic to die.

MR. ALEXANDER (*visionary tone*): For thirty years I've put up with their antics and not once have I committed suicide! (*More mundane.*) But if you'd like to learn how its done, Mrs. Shithead, take this gadget and listen in while I lay the law down to McManus.

MRS. SHITHEAD (*puzzled*): Why, what is it?

MR. ALEXANDER (*proudly*): An electronic listening device, Mrs. Shithead. Better known as an E.L.D. You have to keep your property bugged these days to succeed in the landlord game. (*Demonstrating.*) You turn it on here. (*Sound of switch being flicked, followed by static and a cat meow from receiver. Hearty laughter of both.*) And McManus is naive enough to believe that a tenant can keep secrets from a conscientious landlord!

MCMANUS (*whispering*): This calls for a change of tactics, Archimedes. Plan 326B.

MRS. SHITHEAD: How ever can I thank you, Mr. Alexander, short of granting you a share of those conjugal rights which have been consigned through all eternity to a less worthy man. (*Aside.*) This is going to make my day. I only wish that the laws of nature could be suspended and that all my little Shitheads could be whisked here from daycamp

in a cloud of glory to share their mother's ecstasy and frolic at her side.

MR. ALEXANDER: One more thing, Mrs. Shithead. I don't quite know how to say this to a lady of your breeding... but McManus, once he gets going... he's a bit of a poet, you see, and....

MRS. SHITHEAD (*maternal tone*): I think I understand, Mr. Alexander. Do you mean he indulges in four-letter words?

MR. ALEXANDER: He does, Mrs. Shithead—but not the ones we've all grown up with and become hardened to. Not *shit*, or *fuck* or *cunt*, or *arse*... none of the usual stuff. I don't know how to describe his poetry, other than to remind you that in obstetrics they have a term for something that happens just prior to the expulsion of the fetus....

MRS. SHITHEAD (*appalled*): *Bloody show???*

MR. ALEXANDER: I'll say no more. But should my conversation with McManus take an unhealthy turn—that is, should McManus start to rave about his, er... *life*... would you call Police Headquarters and tell them to get over here right away, and to bring plenty of tear gas? Just push the red button on the E.L.D. and you'll have a direct link to Lieutenant Riley.

MRS. SHITHEAD (*puzzled*): But how will I know if he's raving about his life?

MR. ALEXANDER (*blithely*): That's easy. His life is his wife and his wife is the menopause. (*Sound of rickety gate creaking open.*) I'm off, Mrs. Shithead. Remember me to your husband. (*Kentucky-fried accent.*) And if your husband should take it into his head to sell the house soon, Ma'am, with all the illegals moving in and all—just tell him to get in touch with the Colonel. (*Sound of gate creaking shut. Then patter of footsteps proceeding up walk and ascending rickety steps. Brief silence, followed by door chime.*) Arthur McManus? Alexander here. Time for lease renewal.

MCMANUS (*muttering to himself*): Coming, Chester, coming. (*Cat meow.*) Shhh! Archimedes! In the closet. (*Urgently.*) Go on! (*Sound of door opening. Affected pleasure and surprise.*) Chester Alexander! Come in, come in!

MCMANUS *slams the door with sinister finality.*

MRS. SHITHEAD (*nervously*): I don't like the way he slammed that door. I'd better turn on the whoosie-whatsie and make sure Mr. Alexander isn't being molested.

Sound of switch being flicked, followed by static. The ensuing conversation is heard over MRS. SHITHEAD'S listening device and should be delivered with a rhetorical bravado reminiscent of

old-time radio.

MCMANUS (*affably*): Take your rubbers off, Chester, and come into the parlor. I didn't know it was raining.

MR. ALEXANDER: It isn't. I wear my rubbers rain or shine. Saves wear and tear on the shoes.

MCMANUS: You can't imagine how glad I am to see you. I've written three or four thousand poems since our last encounter. Sit down. You're looking rather emaciated, aren't you?

MR. ALEXANDER (*guardedly*): Haven't had much sleep lately, Arthur.

MCMANUS (*preoccupied tone*): Hope the family's okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: Fine. (*Darkly.*) The family's fine.

MCMANUS: Ah, here's what I'm looking for. A poem I wrote for the spring issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. They sent it back in a lead-lined envelope with a warning note from their lawyer. (*About to launch into reading.*) I call it, "Nurse, Pass Me That Scalpel, We're Into Flesh Again..."

His reading is interrupted by a loud cat meow.

MR. ALEXANDER: Excuse me, Arthur, but didn't I just hear a cat meow?

MCMANUS: Absolutely not! Your ears have deceived you. Better see an otologist.

MRS. SHITHEAD: The brazen old geezer!

MR. ALEXANDER: Let's get down to business, Arthur. I know you're keeping a cat in this house and you know I know it. I don't doubt that the cat knows I know it.

MRS. SHITHEAD: I could easily fall in love with that man!

MR. ALEXANDER: Saw the animal myself, sneaking around by the garbage cans. (*Trying to trap him.*) It's what they call an orange tiger, isn't it?

MCMANUS: Now that you mention it, we did have a stray in the neighborhood a while back. A Bengal tiger, just like you say.

Roar of tiger is heard.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Oh, the artful old futzer!

MCMANUS: I made the mistake of putting a leg-of-lamb out for it and had a devil of a time getting it to go away. (*Musing.*) Haven't seen that beast around lately. Hope it wasn't run over by a trailer-truck.

Very loud cat meow.

MR. ALEXANDER: Come now, McManus. I have no doubt that that meow was heard all the way out to the front gate where Agnes Shithead is waiting for me.

MCMANUS: I have no doubt of it either.

MRS. SHITHEAD (*knowingly*): Nor I.

MCMANUS (*baiting him*): But if I did have a cat, what of it?

MR. ALEXANDER (*adopting Irish brogue*): The lease stands before us on the coffee table. I refer you to article thirty-nine, which states: "No animal or animals of any kind may be kept on hitherto described premises without written permission of lessor. Breach of this clause will constitute grounds for immediate eviction." Now I find that almost as clear as *Revelation*, chapter eight, verses ten through eleven, don't you, Laddie?

MCMANUS (*sound of him at bookcase, thumbing through Bible*): "And then the third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch. And it fell on a third of the rivers, and on the fountains of water. The name of this star is *Wormwood*. A third of the waters became *Wormwood*, and many men died of the water which was made bitter." (*Short pause.*) I see your analogy, Chester. But these verses raise an interesting question. (*Moving in for the kill.*) Granted that I am not allowed to keep that least noxious of animals, the domestic house cat on these premises, which once, long ago, in a fit of genius, your great-grandfather chistened *Wormwood*; How is it, Sir, that you have had the gall to keep a badger in my toilet these fifteen years?

MR. ALEXANDER (*normal accent*): Don't try to confuse the issue with your poetry, Arthur. The badger will die soon. You know that better than I do.

MCMANUS (*snorting to himself*): Die soon. Do you have any idea what the life expectancy of a badger is these days, with all the miracle drugs on the market? I called the University to inquire. (*Triumphantly.*) Eighty-six years, Chester. EIGHTY-SIX YEARS! That's the current life expectancy of the North American Badger! And now that they've cracked the genome there's no telling where it'll end!

MR. ALEXANDER: This is becoming unpleasant, Arthur.

MCMANUS (*appalled by his lack of sensitivity*): Unpleasant??? What do you think it's been like living at Wormwood all these years—lying a-bed nights, listening to that wretched animal scraping around down there. (*Dramatic pause.*) Did you ever hear a badger cry? Should I go down on all fours to imitate its anguish? Shall I describe what it feels like to flush the toilet, knowing there's a helpless animal down there, taking all that abuse?

MRS. SHITHEAD (*grudgingly*): A good point.

MCMANUS (*playing to Mrs. Shithead*): And then, on top of all this tribulation, to have to listen to the neighbors slandering the memory of my poor dead wife, thanks to Agnes Shithead spreading that rumor that we put the badger down there ourselves, just to get the publicity....

MRS. SHITHEAD (*incensed*): Not a very good point.

MCMANUS: And people wonder why I write poetry!

MR. ALEXANDER (*losing his composure*): Torment me all you like about the badger, Arthur, but get that God-damned cat out of my building!

MCMANUS (*insistent*): I need that God-damned cat! And any other bag of guts that cares to rub carcasses! (*Fondly.*) Fur, fleas, and unabashed desire, purring and washing and romping me forth from darkness each morning. I need that more than my insulin shots, if I'm expected to get through yet another bloody....

MRS. SHITHEAD: Oh-oh. Sounds like the menopause.

MR. ALEXANDER (*businesslike*): I came to sign a lease, Arthur. If you're going to start with the poetry, I'll put my rubbers on and go.

MCMANUS (*launching assault*): What's wrong, Chester? Afraid of a little poetry? Beneath the rhetoric of that wretched lease, which you have made your Bible, Koran and Bhagavad Gita... can it be that fugitive emotions of joy and sorrow lie in wait like hidden serpents, coiled and ready to strike?

MR. ALEXANDER (*unruffled*): You won't find an ounce of your damned poetry here, Arthur. I've been too busy earning daily bread and raising my children. (*Scornfully.*) You'd be surprised how little time that leaves for poetry and badger-bile.

MCMANUS (*seeing an opening*): I'd forgotten about your children, Chester. (*Solicitous.*) Yes, take out your wallet—do let's see their photographs. (*Brief silence while ALEXANDER passes photos to MCMANUS*). One of those digital cameras, eh? (*Identifying subject.*) Walter, the boy. Your eldest. Standing in an Afghan village, surrounded by children.

MR. ALEXANDER (*with emotion*): Formerly Eagle Scout. Doing his duty and making us proud. Didn't bring him up to be a punk, like these whining college kids we've been hearing about on TV! If you're going to reap the harvest—and I assure you, Walter is going to reap and reap and reap, cutting a swathe across these amber waves of grain that will be long remembered on the continent—then, first, you've got to get your hands a little muddy, putting in the seed.

MCMANUS: Touch of Frost there.

MR. ALEXANDER (*ignoring him*): And once you've risked your life for your country, you think twice before you start a-warbling your "Ashes, Ashes, All Fall Down."

A children's choir picks up the "Ashes, Ashes" refrain, chanting it regularly throughout the following dialogue. The chant has a hypnotic effect upon ALEXANDER.

MCMANUS (*studying another photo*): The girl, Wendy. Seventeen now, isn't she? That's an age that brings a father nothing but sorrow. Smoking pot, sniffing glue, and galloping about with the baggy pants set, I bet....

MR. ALEXANDER (*submerging*): The girl, Wendy, seventeen last week. Formerly girl scout. (*Betraying some lechery.*) Measurements: 38-22-36. Lost the Women of the Moose Beauty Contest only because she wouldn't go down on the judges. (*Pause.*) Cheer leader. Rainbow Girl. Student Council President. (*Triumphantly.*) Escorted to her Senior Prom by Carrie Underwood's hairdresser! (*Eyes cocked towards future.*) Plans as per yearbook: College and Modelling. (*Reiterating.*) College and Modelling. (*Fearfully.*) Then....

Children's choir breaks off abruptly on "Ashes, Ashes," creating expectant hush.

MR. ALEXANDER (*entranced*): Enter nice young man with Peter Pan sex organs, begging for Wendy's hand. (*Wistfully.*) 38-22-36. (*Bitterly.*) Take her to church and kiss her goodbye. Choke back the tears as he whisks her away, fully licensed to play with her sugar-bun.

MCMANUS: i.e., her cunt.

MR. ALEXANDER: Next thing you know, they're dropping in every week with a couple of wisecracking children, playing Eminem on their i phones and text-messaging pedophiles. And they teach them to pee on the furniture and heckle you into your grave.

MCMANUS: cf., the menopause.

MR. ALEXANDER (*surfacing*): What did you say?

MCMANUS (*violently*): I.E., HER CUNT! CF., THE MENOPAUSE! Enough about

your daughter Pam or Wendy or whatever the hell name you rejoice in. It'll be sixty years before Little Miss Tits will appeal to a spider like myself! (*On home ground at last; there is no stopping him now.*) Surely, you've heard the ribald story of my wife's battle with the menopause, Chester? That's what the doctor's thought her cancer was at first.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Oh-oh. "His life is his wife—and his wife is the menopause."

MCMANUS: I sit up far into the night, writing line after line on that theme for a poem designed to bite the universe. I sing it to the clock, I sing it to the stars, I sing it to the spirits who people my little world. And we all laugh and laugh and laugh....

Chorus of demonic laughter.

MR. ALEXANDER (*in manner of sex-kitten, resisting pre-coital attack*): Oh, Arthur, please, no, I, oh, oh, don't, oh my God, no, want to, oh no, hear about, oh, the, please stop, menopause.

MCMANUS (*fiendishly*): Don't want to hear about the menopause? Look me up sometime in *Who's Who in Gynecology*. I am the world's leading authority on the subject.

MR. ALEXANDER (*panic-stricken*): Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, help me! (*Thinking better of it.*)
MRS. SHITHEAD, HELP ME!!!

MRS. SHITHEAD (*flicking switch on receiver*): Poor Mr. Alexander. (*Incensed.*) The nerve of a mere man pretending to be an authority on the menopause! (*Trying to cope.*) Agnes, brace yourself; you must not become emotional in time of the breaking of nations. (*Flick of switch. Enough static to indicate poor reception.*) Lieutenant Riley? Come in, Lieutenant.

LIEUTENANT RILEY (*lethargic voice*): Riley speaking.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Lieutenant, this is Agnes Shithead.

LIEUTENANT RILEY: Hold on a minute, lady. I've mislaid my BIC. (*Preposterous sounds of RILEY searching desk for pen.*) Okay. Now, could you give me that name again?

MRS. SHITHEAD (*aside*): Oh, poor Mr. Alexander. If only there were some way to dispense with these fatal formalities and begin *in medias res*, like the classic poets always did. It's Agnes Shithead, Lieutenant.

LIEUTENANT RILEY: Would you mind spelling that, please?

MRS. SHITHEAD (*violently*): SHITHEAD! AGNES SHITHEAD! S-H-I-T-H-E-A-D.

LIEUTENANT RILEY: I'm sorry, lady, reception here's atrocious. Did you say *Shithead* or *Fuckface*?

MRS. SHITHEAD (*exploding*): I SAID SHITHEAD, YOU CUNT-NUZZLING PIG! (*Pleased as punch.*) Learnt that from my daughter, Betty, when she came home from Berkeley last Christmas.

LIEUTENANT RILEY: Got it! Agnes Shithead calling for Chester Alexander. Who are you, anyway, his concubine?

MRS. SHITHEAD: I am no such thing! I am a respectable middle-middle class American bourgeois housewife, and I have a grown son in Afghanistan fighting the TALLEEEBAN!

LIEUTENANT RILEY (*cunningly*): Then how come you're in trouble with the police?

MRS. SHITHEAD (*indignantly*): I am NOT in trouble with the police. Far from it! I am calling for Chester Alexander, a man highly regarded in this community, to request police assistance. (*Militant voice.*) We need a policeman right away, Lieutenant! There's going to be an EEE-viction! And Mr. Alexander said I should tell you to bring plenty of tear gas!

LIEUTENANT RILEY (*snapping out of his lethargy*): What's the address there?

MRS. SHITHEAD (*greatly relieved*): We're finally communicating! (*Lickety-Split.*) One trillion, six hundred and eighty-eight billion, three hundred and ninety-two million, seven hundred and thirty thousand, five hundred and twenty-six WORMWOOD VISTA WAY.

LIEUTENANT RILEY (*waggishly*): I'll be there before anyone can get his gas-mask on! (*Embarrassing silence.*) That's not my own, Mrs. Shithead. I heard it on Letterman. Over and out.

MRS. SHITHEAD (*hearty amen*): Over and out!

Sound of switch being flicked. Brief silence. Sound of second switch being flicked.

MCMANUS (*caught in mid-sentence by Mrs. Shithead's receiver*): ...you'd think a plumber had been fiddling down there, tightening every nut and bolt in her body. Trembling, she averts her eyes and braces for the final indignity. (*Pause.*) And then—one day (horror of horrors!): the bleeding stops!

MR. ALEXANDER (*profoundly shaken*): Please, Arthur, no more. You've made your point a thousand-fold. (*Scandalized.*) Poems about scabby rectums, bloody vaginas, decaying ovaries! (*Pause.*) Somehow, I was expecting something a little more uplifting this time. (*Reluctantly.*) Fetch me my rubbers, Arthur. I must be off. Far, far from here, a woman

is waiting.

MCMANUS (*incredulous*): You're not going to leave before you've dribbled your usual schmaltz, Chester? Some little bonbon from Readers Digest or Deepak Chopra, explaining how I might paste my life back together again, provided I have the willpower? A little touch of Dale Carnegie in the night? (Pause.) Dribble, Chester. Let's hear those seventy-six trombones from Alexander's Ragtime Band!

MR. ALEXANDER (*unoffended*): Write about the stars. Write about the sea. Write about hummingbirds, long-legged girls and bougainvillea. Forget summer and smoke. Make your theme summer and sunlight. (*Pointedly*.) And find another woman, Arthur. It's never too late to find another woman. (*Darkly*.) If you look hard enough.

A WILD, ZANY, HEART-RENDING CRY IS HEARD—A CRY THAT WILL CHILL THE MARROW IN YOUR COCCYX BONE AND MAKE YOUR ARSE STAND ON END.

MR. ALEXANDER: Good God!! What was that???

MCMANUS (*triumphantly*): THE CRY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN BADGER!!!

MR. ALEXANDER (*wearily*): I'm leaving. The police have been notified. (*Sadly*.) It's ragtime, Arthur. Your throne is crawling with maggots. You have five minutes to abdicate.

MCMANUS (*with great dignity*): I shall never abdicate.

MR. ALEXANDER (*reluctantly*): Then, Sir, we shall have to depose you.

Sound of MCMANUS opening the door for ALEXANDER. As door opens, MRS. SHITHEAD switches off receiver, and we listen with the naked ear. Sound of ALEXANDER descending several porch steps.

MCMANUS: Chester...

MR. ALEXANDER: Yes?

MCMANUS: I've prepared a statement. May I read it?

MR. ALEXANDER (*annoyed*): What's the point? You're not news anymore.

MCMANUS (*sardonically*): Nevertheless, I'd like my fifteen minutes of fame.

MR. ALEXANDER: You and three hundred million other people! (*Softened by a very loud*

cat meow.) Read your statement, Arthur. (*Sudden inspiration.*) We'll even record it for you.

Sound of MR. ALEXANDER descending remaining steps.

MCMANUS (*calling after him*): DO NOT GO GENTLE, CHESTER....

MR. ALEXANDER (*snorting to himself as he goes down walk*): Now what the devil is *that* supposed to mean?

A rather dispirited cat meow.

MCMANUS: Patience, Archimedes, I'm coming.

Sound of MCMANUS slamming door with finality.

MRS. SHITHEAD: Chester! Oh, my poor wounded darling! In the last hour my pants have been invaded by a passion for you which the unchaste might be all too quick to mistake for Platonic love. (*Pause.*) Lieutenant Riley is here with the tear gas, sweetheart.

LIEUTENANT RILEY: Tenants giving you trouble again, Mr. Alexander?

MR. ALEXANDER (*disoriented*): Yes, terrible trouble, again and again and again.

LIEUTENANT RILEY (*childish singsong*): Do you want me to use the tear gas?

MR. ALEXANDER (*absently*): Yes, tear gas, mace, wooden slugs, birdshot, helicopters, rockets, tazer guns—whatever you think necessary, so long as it all falls short of the thermonuclear warhead.

LIEUTENANT RILEY (*angrily*): I wish you had told me that on the phone, Mrs. Shithead. All I brought was the tear gas.

MRS. SHITHEAD (*ignoring RILEY, her attention riveted on ALEXANDER*): Darling, is something wrong? We're going to win, aren't we? Our side, I mean. Both the police and Western Civilization are with us! We're surely going to win, aren't we, honey?

MR. ALEXANDER (*absent-mindedly*): Technically, Agnes, technically....

MRS. SHITHEAD (*aside*): I don't like this *technically* stuff....

LIEUTENANT RILEY: The canisters are ready, Mr. Alexander.

MR. ALEXANDER: Shut up, pig! McManus is about to read his statement. We shall all

be born again in the ruby-red poetry of his bloodied life. Press the record button, Mrs. Shithead, so we can put it up on You Tube. (We owe it to our grandchildren.)

They listen in silence as MCMANUS clears his throat and begins.

MCMANUS: "Start a new life," the gentleman said to me. "Never too late to find another woman." (*Pause.*) Perhaps I should go courting. A frog did it. (*Bitterly.*) Perhaps I should go courting, my nose to the ground, following vomit and tobacco trails until I find something that smells like a bag of ten day old garbage, left out in the rain on a muggy summer's night. I might come upon her in a Bowery alleyway, lying in a puddle of her own puke and spittle; swaddled in garments that reek of a body virginal to bath or shower. A woman with one poor pair of panties to her name, stained by the red-black sauce of her last six menstrual flows. All of it for me alone: a mushy piece of rotten woman, reeking with all the irresistible decay (God, how I love it!) of this filthy, stinking, dying star, which once, long long ago, somebody's great grandfather christened "Wormwood."

MRS. SHITHEAD (*scientifically*): This is disgusting.

MR. ALEXANDER (*dreamily*): You heard the woman, Riley. Throw the first canister.

Hissing sound of tear gas, then breaking glass. MCMANUS is completely unaffected; his voice rising in volume can be heard above the tear gas.

MCMANUS (*announcing theme*): Then, little by little. Little by little I would acclimate myself. Two weeks and I would no longer need to stuff my nostrils with rue to dispel the stench of her armpits. Four weeks and I would be able to sit with her by the fire—man and wife—without wincing each time she opened her tartared mouth to spew forth words of love or the latest news from the inferno. Six weeks and I would be able to kiss her—yes, kiss her, and even (why not?) stick my tongue into her reechy orifice!

MR. ALEXANDER (*dreamily*): Throw the second canister, Riley.

Sound of second canister and more breaking glass.

MCMANUS (*still imperturbed*): Amanda. (*Pause.*) She would have been seventy-nine years old this Sunday. (*Pause.*) She would sit by the fire, and I would open the door. (*Rephrasing.*) Open the door and gaze at a woman sitting by the fire. False teeth now, perhaps, and a mustard plaster to ward off the evils of rheumatism. Bring out the old wooden back-scratcher from its forgotten hook on the pantry door and give her tired spine a little thrill. Flesh crinkled, farded, and full of age and arthritis. But happy. (*Voice starting to break.*) Happy to be tolerated and maybe even stroked by another animal. (*Voice breaking.*) No, more than happy. Ecstasy! Ecstasy!!!

Sound of MCMANUS weeping.

LIEUTENANT RILEY: It's working, Mr. Alexander. The tear gas is working. He's crying like a little baby.

MRS. SHITHEAD: This is all so confusing! We won, didn't we?

MR. ALEXANDER (*taking her under the wing of his rhetoric*): Of course we did, sweetheart. And this evening, as you sit rocking ever so slowly back and forth on the porch swing with your husband and all your little Shitheads—while barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, and touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue—darkness will come nuzzling up to you and the fruit of thy womb and do its damndest to create a silhouette not unreminiscent of The Holy Family. And you will turn to your spouse in utter peacefulness, and you will say:

MRS. SHITHEAD (*sound of porch swing; blissful voice*): We won. There can be no doubt about it. We won.

MR. ALEXANDER (*stoically*): No doubt about it.

Sound of MCMANUS weeping. Very loud cat meow. CRY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN BADGER. Then flick of switch as MCMANUS turns on stereo. Volume up on Bach's "Suite #1 in C Major." A scratch and several abrupt needle skips unbeautify the music.

Fade-out, gently.