

The
Road
to
Renewal

By **Kirby
Lee
Davis**

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1

Chapter

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When this age is dust, and the historians among our children take it upon themselves to judge us, they shall know we were just downright rude by our computer chips.

It all started in complete innocence. As we headed off for a movie, I paused along the way to buy my wife a soda. The sign on a glowing mechanical monolith declared, “Try me! I’m a new Talking Coke Machine!” So I did. My quarters rolled down its innards as the familiar “Always Coca-Cola” jingle bounded from a hidden speaker. That liquid sugar pusher told me to choose a button. I obeyed.

“Thank you,” said a voice only a bit tarnished by a mechanical ring. As I welcomed the gentle tumbling that signaled my can’s delivery, the monolith added, “You’ve got a spot on your shirt.”

“Really?” I mumbled, not expecting such a response. “Where?”

“On your sleeve. That black grunge shaped like a

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walrus, dripping slime. You know, I happen to know a good wash box at cleaning spots like that. No trouble.”

I glanced around, but to my annoyance, I couldn't find the stain. So I grabbed my chill can of pop and tried to walk away.

The pusher had other plans.

“Is that your car?” it asked of my just-washed '96 Mustang Cobra. I said yes, picking up speed with every step towards its jet-black door.

“Nice broad,” called the can dispenser.

That made me stop. “She's my wife!”

“I meant the car.”

Wasting not another minute I slid into my seat, little understanding what I was doing in such a conversation, nor wishing to continue it further. Little did I know my troubles had just begun.

“Honey, how'd you get that spot on your sleeve?” my wife wished to know.

Grumbling something I didn't want her to hear, I handed her the Coke. She popped it open expecting a fizz. Instead it said, “Hello! I'm the new talking Coke can. Please drink me slowly, especially since he's driving, and don't tear off the tab. You'll just end up dropping it in my can and swallowing it, and believe me, that can hurt. I know this for a fact. And don't spill me on this nice broad, though from the looks of that shirt she probably has more stains than I could count. And just between you and me, your nails could use a coat of paint.”

Then the car butted in: “James, you forgot to buckle your seat belt again. I'm going to huff, and puff, and blow your face in if you don't do that now.”

Fastening my seat belt, grumbling all the while, I sped off to the theater. On the screen shined an adequate,

though somewhat shallow love story. My wife's choice, naturally. Before heading into this darkness, the theater manager told me of a new security system, but I didn't spend much time thinking about it. Halfway through the picture, my seat buzzed.

"Too much weight on the armrest," came a mechanical voice. "Desist nuptial activity."

Now I admit I was leaning over, but I had a good reason.

"She's my wife!" I whispered to the floor.

"Irrelevant. This is a family theater. Desist at once."

My wife laughed, but I wasn't amused. I stared into the dark shadows of that sticky concrete floor and smirked, "Just what are you going to do about it?"

Wiring in my chair soon showed me just what future shock really was. I felt that electrical prodding all the way out the door, across town, and to my desktop computer, making me even more determined to share this outrage with my readers while the shock still wracked my mind. It was truly excruciating.

"That's *excruciating*," this know-it-all terminal reminded me. "And if you asked me, it sounds like you deserved it."

That was the straw that broke my camel's back. I was furious.

"Who cares what you think?" I snapped. "What's it to you?"

"Look," replied my PC. "Do you think I enjoy reading this drivel you type in day after day after day? What good is it, really? Or you, for that matter. Listen – you're afraid of the future, and we both know why. We're superior to you. You're a dinosaur, and what's worse, you don't even try to improve yourself. Your clothes don't match. You have no clue how that greasy

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slop you eat abuses you. You refuse to exercise, rest, or sleep. You just don't care. You're a disaster."

I must admit, I wasn't expecting that from this talking bundle of circuits. From my wife, perhaps, but not my vanilla personal computer. "Oh, yeah?" was about the best retort I could devise. Then came an inspiration. "Well, take this!"

With almost tyrannical joy, I made it my business to type every key that keyboard offered – in random triplicate, no less. I pounded that mass of plastic so hard, it surely needed to have its silicon chips examined.

I've felt pretty good since then. Single-handed, I triumphed in humanity's eternal battle with encroaching mechanization. If only my PC would stop intentionally misspelling my words. Why

2

Introductions

“HARRIGAN!”

That primal scream echoed through the near-empty congregation of chipped and scarred World War Two surplus desks, moth-eaten chairs, and rusty, mangled metal file cabinets that together could only be called a newsroom. Though he'd walked these halls for years, James always smiled when pondering this stockpile of nostalgia and necessity. Countless mislaid or abandoned manila folders mixed among stacked newspapers challenging the Tower of Babel. Unbalanced fan blades buzzed within scattered computers long past expiration, their cracked cases so choked by cigar smoke and gathered dust that you couldn't read their scorched labels warning of combustible rapid heat build-up. And then there were the cherished collections of decades-old phone books, almanacs, dictionaries, histories, travel guides, style rules, press books, catalogues, annual reports, area maps, and just about any other imaginable source of unforeseen, once-in-a-lifetime trivia needs. So

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much of this seemed out-of-date in the budding internet world, and yet James couldn't imagine discarding any of it just yet.

“HARRIGAN! Didn't you hear me?”

Deep within his fortress walls of past editions and staked unopened mail, James Harrigan leaped from his monolithic PC with a laugh of vindication. He *knew* Reynolds had been reading his column as he'd saved it!

Like most newspaper editorial departments, Publisher and Managing Editor Dick Reynolds ruled his literary kingdom from a cluttered cube of glass and plaster within shouting range of all five reporters feeding *The Franklin Beaver Beacon*. Through five years serving the 30,000-some residents within its southwest Oklahoma City suburb, this twice-a-week tabloid grew three-fold by improving upon the legacies of several bygone weeklies. Since he'd been at the helm from Day One, Reynolds took great pride in the *Beacon's* success. He nurtured his staff to develop their beats to his exact specifications, and he made a point to edit every word that appeared in print.

Though James felt confident he was Reynolds' heir apparent, with each step towards “The Furnace” – as their editor's office was called – Harrigan girded his ego for the lambasting he knew would follow.

Disillusion reflected from Reynolds's stark face as he sat fuming behind the plain Windows computer anchoring his enormous desk. Most times the old man loved to project a dashing executive image, comfortable in double-breasted suits, silk shirts, and imported ties. His prim and proper mustache fit these well, waxed and curled in the oldest of traditions, although the twice-broken nose flaring from his pudgy face gave him the blunt edge of a heavyweight boxer – an impression the

fiery editor seemed to relish when confronting his unruly office staff.

Reynolds erupted from his leather rocker as Harrigan drew near.

“Get in here!” he snapped, loosening his tie from his open collar. “And close the door.”

James breathed deep, steadying himself as the oak slab latched behind him. Something was wrong here; usually Reynolds liked his staff to hear his rants.

The editor didn’t bother retaking his seat. Nor did he give his reporter a chance to sit down.

“You think this is funny?” Dick bellowed.

“Well, yes,” James couldn’t deny.

Reynolds paced behind his desk, rolling his head from side to side, folding and unfolding his arms across his barrel chest. Just watching him made James nervous, so he sought comfort in one of the two chairs Reynolds left for guests.

“I know you don’t want me to write humor all the time,” Harrigan continued, wondering what his boss was thinking – and even more important, why he wasn’t bashing James over the head with his thoughts. “But everyone I talk to seems to like it.”

Reynolds dropped hard into his chair. His wife’s photo clattered against the shaken wall. That 8x11 frame held the only image he kept in that office, outside of his wall of marked-up newsprint.

“You’re toying with the audience,” Reynolds began. “There hasn’t been a talking Coke machine here in a decade.”

“Well, maybe so,” James allowed, “but I always liked them. They make a good foil.”

“And they don’t talk like that.”

“Well, maybe not anymore.”

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“The cars don’t either.”

“That’s where the humor comes in. You remember... laughter? ‘Ha ha’ and all that?”

Reynolds wasn’t amused, but an interrupting phone call siphoned some of his frustration. He yanked up the receiver and snapped, “*Beaver Beacon* newsroom, Reynolds speaking.”

He paused, listening with suppressed irritation that soon wiggled free. “No,” he barked, “*news* room. You don’t hear any loud music; that’s... a basketball tournament on the tube. We have no nude dancers. I didn’t say ‘nudes room,’ I said *newsroom*. Yes, I understand, I guess.” Then his rich baritone voice hardened. “Look, we don’t sell drinks. This isn’t a bar. Newsroom – N-E-W-S. That’s right, the thing you read.”

Snarling, the publisher slammed the black receiver back into its cradle. His whole desk shook.

“Didn’t even say goodbye,” he growled.

James restrained his laughter. “What basketball game is that? We don’t even have a TV!”

“Oh, I just didn’t want to insult him,” Reynolds shrugged, turning his attention back to Harrigan. “Look. This isn’t England. You might like Monty Python, but to many of our readers, that’s heady stuff.”

“Oh, come on! That wasn’t absurd satire! Well, maybe it was, but not out of left-field.”

The editor glanced to his graying acoustical tiling as if appealing to God. Harrigan saw his eyes fix on some drifting cobwebs that seemed to spell out bad words for body odor.

“And what’s all this ‘wife’ business?” Reynolds finally asked, sliding back into his chair even as his voice softened. “I thought we’d agreed.”

That told James all he needed to know. Reynolds wasn't angry; he was concerned – though about what, Harrigan wasn't exactly sure.

“Well....” James heard himself meandering and took a breath to steady his nerves. “Well, she makes a good foil, too.”

He'd meant that as a joke, but he could tell the boss man didn't get it. In truth, James didn't much understand it, either. Part of him wondered why he'd even said it. Another part didn't care.

“That may be how you see it,” Reynolds said, “but she still lives here, and so do her parents. And they don't like it. And it confuses the hell out of our readers. They know you're divorced. Hell – we ran it in our own damn paper!”

No matter who he was talking to, James didn't like hearing such language, and he always made a point to say so. Even though Reynolds knew how the reporter felt, James reminded him.

“I don't give a damn!” Reynolds roared back. “When you own the damn paper you can damn well do whatever you please! But right now you're working for me, James Harrigan, and I expect you to write copy the way I want it. The way we've both agreed it'll be written! Comprendo?”

James nodded. That stare chiseled the point in his conscious. He didn't need this roasting any longer.

“We're not here to offend anyone,” the editor stressed. “Not in a humor column, anyway. And especially not our ex-wives.”

Reynolds swept his thick fingers through his thinning auburn hair. His eyes focused on the ceiling.

“Look, James, it's been, what? A year?”

The reporter stiffened. “Eleven months.”

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“Yeah. Well, I know it’s been hard. I’ve been there. I’ve *been there*. It hurts like hell. But it’s happened, son. It was her choice, and nothing you do’s going to change it.”

“That’s supposed to cheer me up?”

“No, damn it! I’m trying to make you see sense! It’s time to accept it and move on. Others are depending on you, James. You can’t go on living in the past. It’d be better for you, for her, your parents... and your kids.”

Harrigan clamped his fingers around the armrests. His memories burned hot from the last time Reynolds had brought this up.

“I don’t know if this is any of your business,” he blurted out.

No one knew how it wrecked him inside, to not be able to hold his young girls, to read to them, hear their prayers. To not even see them for three and a half weeks each month!

No one understood how that betrayal ripped his soul, distancing him from all he’d ever been.

“And for us, too,” Reynolds plowed on, ignoring the interruption. “I’m just trying to help, son. You know that. And I know what you do at home’s your business. But if you insist on writing about your family – even in satire, James – then it’s my business, too. I have to protect the *Beacon*. You know that.”

It was all James could do to close his eyes and ask God for patience and guidance. It provided no respite, didn’t suck away his anger, or drown his ills in chocolate syrup. But that quick prayer provided an anchor for his hopes – even in moments like this, when he’d open his eyes to find the object menacing him was still staring into the depths of his soul.

James reminded himself that Reynolds was trying to

do some good, in his own sandpaper-rough way. Still, James wondered how much longer he could cope with it.

“You know,” the editor paused, “one more thing, Harrigan. That computer was right; you are getting paranoid about the future.”

“I am not!”

“About change, anyway. Maybe that’s why you won’t let go of Charlotte.”

James heard his breath whistling through his lips. A slow, agonizing wail of a sigh.

He didn’t care about the future. Or the present, for that matter.

It was too much to contemplate. James had to get out, to think. Or even better, to forget this conversation had ever happened. That would be so much easier.

“Are you finished?” he grumbled.

“I’m trying to help you, damn it! But you don’t need my help, do you? You’re so smart. You think you can take on the world all by yourself! Listen, Mr. James Harrigan. If you’re not careful, you’re going to get yourself in so deep, you won’t be able to dig your way out – and then no one will shine your boots for all the slow boats to China!”

James’s aggravation got the best of him halfway through that speech. Rising with a shrug of indifference, he’d reached the door and opened it before the absurdity of Reynolds’s advice made him pause in confusion.

A sly grin cracked his editor’s hard face.

“And what are you still doing with that cross on?” Reynolds shouted.

James couldn’t help smiling at the mocking character his editor now resumed. They seemed to end every such conversation on this subject, suggesting someone had

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objected to his display of faith at work.

“What else would I wear?” James replied with smooth conviction, his left hand slipping around the two-inch pewter cross dangling about his neck. “It’s what I am.”

It’s the only hope I’ve got, James almost admitted. Then he hardened.

“You can fire me,” the reporter said, “but I won’t take this cross off – for anyone.”

“Augh! A paranoid Christian!” The editor floated his arms before him as if washing his hands of Harrigan. “Get back to work!”

“I’m done. The column’s it.”

“Change it!”

With a smug chuckle, Harrigan headed back for his desk.

“It’s my night with the gals, remember?” James said over his shoulder. “You go ahead. You’ll do it anyway.” Then he whispered, “That’s why you make the big bucks.”

Scanning over the newsroom, Harrigan verified to his satisfaction that most of the staff hadn’t heard that discussion. A few had long since left for home, as was usual for a Wednesday, with most publication deadlines long past. Still, the walk to his desk felt strange, for those present weren’t paying him the usual sarcastic smirks that went to anyone returning from a chat with the boss. Indeed, their eyes seemed determined to avoid his.

James scanned over his striped gray dress shirt and black corduroys, his endangered wolf tie, his silver cross necklace, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He saw nothing embarrassing.

Harrigan pondered that all the way to his desk. Then

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he forgot it. The scratchy pencil scribbling tacked above his computer reminded him of something far more important: His girls awaited.

3

It Begins

James girded his soul as he pulled his tiny black Geo Metro to the curb of his old home, but as usual, his strength of will proved no defense. Charlotte was her usual cold self, approaching him with icy indifference as he picked up their girls. Hacking him with a machete wouldn't have made his heart bleed more.

He knew what spark relit the embers of her hate. *I shouldn't have brought up the child support payments*, he scolded himself. It didn't matter that James had taxes to pay or personal needs. He should've known what response seeking a reduction would draw.

With some justification, Charlotte claimed nothing had changed; she needed the amount he'd agreed to pay. He couldn't fight that, for in his heart, his girls were worth far more than she ever requested. Still, that didn't release him from his debts and obligations. His limited funds never seemed enough.

James turned away, but his new view offered no escape. He was trapped.

Eleven-year-old Angela always noticed his despair. “Come on, Daddy!” she said, taking his left hand to uplift him.

If there existed any cure for his heartache, it was the love of his daughters. It beamed from their growing forms, dancing black hair, giggling freckled cheeks, and sharp, aware eyes. Having them close nourished his wounded soul.

“Are you ready?” he said.

“That’s a stupid question, isn’t it?” responded nine-year-old Carla. An impish grin blossomed across her joyous face as she took his right hand.

“That’s one way to look at it,” Angela agreed. “After all, we’re all here. The Defiant’s here.”

“And the zoo’s still out there!” Carla shouted.

“Oh, yeah,” James recalled. He had promised them a trip to the Oklahoma City Zoo.

His first thought was one of reluctance, but as he looked at his happy girls, he realized this winter day was unseasonably warm. And since it wasn’t quite 4 p.m., they might arrive with more than an hour to enjoy the sights before the zoo closed at 6. That would leave plenty of time to get something to eat before his church choir practice started.

“Well, I have to gas the car first,” he told them.

“All right!” Carla screamed.

“Just be sure to have them home by 9,” cut in Charlotte, who’d watched in restless irritation from her front step.

James took a deep breath. She’d chosen that moment to step closer, folding her petite arms across her chest in a way that emphasized the curves of her jeans and sweater. But now, even with her black curls flowing so lovely about her shoulders, the threatening force of her

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gaze made James glance away.

Angela didn't notice his unrest. Or perhaps she just overlooked it.

"No problem," she told her mom.

"Nine," Charlotte stressed to James alone. He'd felt chunks of ice that weren't so cold.

"Yes."

"It's a school night, you know."

"I'm not stupid," his defenses kicked in.

Before she could disagree, James shuffled his girls into the compact Metro's back seat and made sure they had their seat belts on. Then he crawled into the Defiant, adjusted its mirrors, took the solid plastic wheel in his hands, and gave his surprisingly loud three-cylinder engine full throttle. That brought a smile to his lips. The little car's unexpected power never ceased to amaze him. Sure, some might dismiss his compact as a casket on wheels, or a motorcycle with a cabin, but driving that sprite runabout not only overcome his fears, but always provided him a smile. Even in the gaze of his ex.

"All right!" Angela called.

"To the zoo!" Carla shouted.

"First the gas station," James said, pulling onto the main road out of that subdivision.

"I don't need any gas!" Carla informed him.

"You might not, but the Defiant does," James said of the Metro.

"She could use a bath, too!" Angela said.

"I do not!" Carla objected.

"Not you," James assured her. "The Defiant."

"No," countered Angela, "I meant Carla."

James clamped his jaws shut. This, he knew, was the wrong time to laugh.

"I don't need a bath!" Carla snapped.

“Oh,” Angela replied. “Well then, maybe you do have gas.”

“Daddy, tell her I don’t have gas!”

“Angela, your sister doesn’t have gas. If she did, she’d be splattered all around us.”

“What?” cried a horrified Carla.

“You remember Willy Wonka,” Angela cut in. “The blueberry girl.”

“Messy,” said James. “Think how long it’d take to clean up. And the smell.”

“Kind of like Tad’s fur balls,” said Angela, enjoying herself. She didn’t see James wince at the drop of his old cat’s name – the black Himalayan that was supposed to have been Charlotte’s pet, only to give his heart and soul to James. The divorce had forced him to leave the aging feline behind, along with almost everything else of that fourteen-year marriage.

“Daddy!” screamed a near-frantic Carla. “I don’t want to explode!”

“No one said you’re going to,” James assured her.

“But you might have a fur ball,” Angela kidded.

In the rear-view mirror, James saw an anguished Carla wind her arms around her chest. From the trembling pout gripping her face, he knew the jokes had gone too far.

“You won’t have a fur ball,” he told his youngest. “After all, you haven’t been chowing down on Tad’s food, have you?”

Carla issued one of her favorite gagging sounds. Chuckling, James steered the Metro toward a local Easy Come, Easy Go gasoline station with an automated car wash. Angela was right, he decided. The warm weather and crystalline sky provided an excellent opportunity to wash some muddy layers of winter salt off his 1996

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Geo's chassis.

"She has been eating ravioli," Angela pointed out.

"Not ravioli!" Carla retorted. "Spaghetti-O's."

"That's good," James said, pulling up to the monolithic Number Seven filling pump. "That ravioli scares me."

That caught even Angela off-guard. "Why?" both girls asked.

Cutting the engine, James twisted to face his daughters. The speckled black fabric of the Metro's bucket seats looked like something you might see covering pet furniture, but it crunched rather neatly as he moved. Oh, how he loved this miniature car!

"Well," he began, "haven't you noticed how the cans look so much alike?"

"Of course," Angela replied. "A can's a can."

"Ah, yes," agreed James. "A miracle of modern times. We can everything from Christmas presents to rocks to air, and all the same way. Yet when you open up some of these cans – like the ravioli – it looks just like Tad's cat food."

"Yuck!" Carla cried out.

"Oh, that's just a coincidence," Angela giggled.

"You might say that," James replied, "until you stand with your nose a quarter-inch from freshly opened cans of ravioli and cat food. Then you realize they look an awful lot alike. So, one time I did a test. I took the labels off, placed some ravioli on one plate and cat food on the other. Then I blindfolded Tad to see if he could tell which one was made by an Italian chef."

"What happened?" Angela pondered aloud.

As James had hoped, Carla leaned forward, her eyes all aglow.

"Two seconds after ripping the blindfold to shreds,"

said James, “Tad sharpened his claws on my arms. When I came to, both samples were gone.”

“Came to what?” asked Carla.

“That’s an expression,” said Angela. “It means he got knocked up.”

“Knocked *out*,” James rushed to correct her.

“That’s a good test,” Carla decided.

“Maybe,” James allowed. Seeing no one waiting behind the Defiant, he decided to continue his tale. “Maybe. But it still worried me that these same companies use the same cans, the same ingredients, the same chefs, the same types of food. You might get the impression they think I’m a cat.”

“I’d like to be a cat,” Angela offered. James decided to ignore that.

“It’s not that I don’t like cat food,” he confided, continuing his tale, “but I don’t. I hate cat food. Each morning that rascal Tad would wake me up by sitting on my face, sticking his wet nose in my ear and meowing until I’d serve him breakfast. He’d run on me and jump on me as if all I had to do in life was feed this huge black cat! It’s like I was his butler! But I’ll tell you girls something – I didn’t spend four years at the University of Football in Norman just to be the butler to a cat!”

“What’s the Universe of Football?” Carla pondered aloud.

“That’s that big round stadium by the duck pond Mommy takes us to,” Angela said. “They teach important sports there.”

“I mean,” interrupted James, hoping to get them back on his point, “it’s kind of nauseating to have to get up before the *Today* show is even on and stick a spoon into something that looks like ravioli. Sometimes I have half a mind to shout, ‘Get up, you lazy cat! Get your own

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ravioli!”

“I bet he could do it,” Carla said.

“But then he wouldn’t be lazy,” Angela told her.

James couldn’t help wondering when his girls had stopped laughing at his tale and started accepting it as fact.

“That’s not what worries me,” he stressed. “I just can’t help wondering if all these food magnates –”

“Magnets?” interrupted Carla. James skipped it.

“– are somewhat like General Motors, putting out a bunch of identical products under slightly different labels. They might have one factory that makes the basic putty, to which they add catnip to half and put it in cans as cat food. The other half is dyed red and canned as ravioli. The only thing really different is the label.”

“So what’s in the label?” Angela wondered.

“Certainly not what’s in the ravioli,” said James, “although it might taste like it.”

“Grandpa says everything’s better with milk,” Carla reminded them.

“The point is,” James went on, “if they can do it with ravioli, they can do it with cream cheese, and if they can do this with cream cheese, they can do it with motor oil, and if they can do it with motor oil, they can do it with nuclear waste. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to open a can of ravioli and find nuclear waste. Even if hiding it in ravioli’s the only way to dispose of it.”

Hitting his punch line in stride, James waited for his daughters to react with glorious laughter. Instead, they just cast blank stares at his hairless face.

Just like Charlotte used to.

Through the rear window he saw a green Honda Civic pull behind him. With a sigh, James knew the time to fill his tank had come.

Only then, noticing her father was not only finished, but about to step outside, did Carla say, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s easy,” said Angela. “Dad has a nuclear waist.”

“Must be why he always wears a belt,” Carla noted.

“Oh, Lord,” moaned James. He could imagine his girls asking his ex-wife about his nuclear waist.

“The whole problem, as I see it, is taking off the labels,” Angela theorized. “You leave the labels on, and you know what’s in the cans. Pretty simple, actually.”

James settled his feet on the cold concrete, sighing at the ease in which she destroyed his tale.

“Another story shot down by hard-nosed editors,” he whispered. “This isn’t my day.”

“I just know I’m not going to clean up any more fur balls,” said Angela. “Not if they have ravioli in them, I’m not. That stuff’s disgusting.”

“Tad must have a nuclear waist, too,” Carla suggested.

“Maybe that’s why some of his chest fur’s going white,” Angela said. “We’d better tell Mom.”