

# *The Sweet Taste of the Bilge*

*By M.T. Harber*

Mainsail Breeze

Maryland



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A Sail/Dive novel

## ***About M.T. Harber***

Michael T. Harber is a writer, and explorer. He has written a number of books, mostly to bide his time between destinations. He doesn't claim to be an intellectual, having dropped out of high school to travel, but as one who wanders the land where palm trees grow he has learned to tell a good story. His world is unlike many who wander this world. He has no fixed address, but prefers to lean on the compassion of friends and family who take him in when his wallet runs dry.

He met up with Paul Rose while Paul was doing some research in Key West, FL. They had some rum, found an instant kinship, and have stayed in touch. They plan to get together in the Caymans sometime soon. M.T. has been known to work as a deck hand to make his passage from place to place. He has, therefore, boarded million dollar yachts as a cook, mechanic, captain's mate, and bartender – all without any previous experience or knowledge.

For my girlfriend

## *Acknowledgements*

To my girl I call Trixie...  
She doesn't have hair like a pixie.  
But she marks up my page,  
like an editor sage.  
And she still looks damn sexy.

My friend Bill, he once said,  
'Think with the big not little head.'  
And he made many edits,  
to get put in the credits.  
But I chose not to instead

I have a brother named Jim,  
Who often goes out on a limb.  
With changes he strives,  
to bring the story alive...  
and yes – I look up to him.

Oh Carol, I must give you credit,  
you certainly know how to edit.  
With many a mark,  
you make the page dark  
and make me want to forget it!

# 1

The phone buzzed. This was no mystery or surprise. The phone always buzzed. When he disconnected the line from his last call, the next one came. His greeting was usually followed by a tirade of expletives for having been put on hold for so long, and then an explanation of what was damaged or destroyed as a result of the motor. George looked at the list of those callers queued up and waiting for service: thirty-five. He knew from experience that meant any given customer was listening to *The Girl from Ipanema* or some other mind numbing bit of Muzak for about five minutes, which did nothing to soothe the tempers of those trying to get a piece of the money pie that the Watsitumi Corporation doled out in drips and drabs to silence the masses as a result of some design flaw or bad o-ring. From the middle of the hall, the rows of cubicles chirped with the next call and someone, perhaps George or someone else in the room, would answer the phone, listen and wait until the irate customer stopped their rant to take a breath. That was the opportunity to quickly inject the lines, "I am sorry for your inconvenience and would like to help reconcile...."

George's cubicle was typical of those around him. Beyond the bland blandness that surrounded him, was his attempt to bring life to the venus fly-trap that had been his life for the last six years. Facing him was a tropical calendar. He never looked ahead at the months to come. He didn't want to know whether June displayed a sailboat, or big palm tree surrounded by the Caribbean blues and greens. On the first of the month, he would slowly lift the calendar page to reveal the next photo. It was the most exhilaration he would receive while at work. But it was a mixed moment because after the great revealing, he would have to wait another month until he could unveil the next piece of paradise. He didn't use the calendar portion at all. His calendar was all managed electronically for him on his office computer. Whenever he was scheduled to attend a meeting or activity, a window on his computer screen would pop up with a blinking button and notify him.

The desk itself was attached to the cubicle walls, so there was no hope of re-orienting his workspace within those walls. Scattered about the desk were pen holders, notepads, and the sundry necessities of office life. In the far corner of his desk were a few pictures of his family. Most of the pictures were five years old or older. His son, Daniel, was off to college. Yet, in the picture on his desk, a much younger Daniel was forever posing in his baseball uniform, clean and pressed from some early spring many moons ago. Next to this was a picture of his wife, Alicia. She was dressed for some event long forgotten. George no longer knew where he stored the camera. He hadn't needed it. The only other artifact decorating the "desert sand" colored walls of this cubicle was a large picture of a sailboat thumb-tacked in such a way that most passersby would not see it.

He wondered if the sailboat picture would spark controversy if someone in management spotted it hanging off to one side of his desk. It was his way to rebel. He had picked it up some years ago when he and his wife Alicia spent a weekend at a sailboat show. They dreamed about sailing one day, or perhaps living aboard one of those pristine showpieces that lined the dock. Hidden behind that picture of the Tartan 4100 was a napkin. It seemed an inconsequential thing, but he knew it was there. The napkin was the list. George and Alicia, one glorious Saturday so many years ago, sat down at an overcrowded restaurant and playfully wrote down what they needed to do to live on one of those million dollar boats.

They talked about winning the lottery, selling the house, buying a boat, finding a slip and defining all of the accoutrements they would need to live “the simple life.” Ironically, the simple life always began by winning the lottery.

On his poster, the Tartan 4100 was cutting its way through white water. The captain had one outstretched arm with his hand pointing forward, his white hair streaming behind him. Younger people, all dressed in matching yacht attire, surrounded this sage at the helm. The dark blue hull sat in stark contrast to the white froth that blurred the edges of water and craft. A single line of large letters across the bottom of the poster read, “Be the dream.” George had never won the lottery, nor had he accomplished one item on that list, but he quietly held on to the dream. He still had the poster and the napkin was safely tucked behind the glossy image of his dream world.

Rachael, a younger woman who once sat in the cubicle next to him, had adorned her space with pictures of Jimmy Buffett. No space was left uncovered. When it was her turn to bring in a birthday cake, or throw some semblance of an office party, she was the first to speak up about the theme. She had tiki stands, grass skirts, parrots, and all the adornments of a plastic tropical world at her command. Human resources had another opinion about such an outburst of personality and contrived some rule about damaging the cubicle walls with thumbtacks forcing Rachel to remove her icon from the Watsitumi walls. She obliged – sort of. She removed the Jimmy Buffett pictures from the walls, but then taped them to all of her office folders. The printouts of her log files were neatly stashed in the folder with Mr. Buffet exiting his plane with a hand casually offering a greeting. Her quarterly reports, organized in a yellow folder, showed Jimmy playing a live concert on a beach somewhere. Needless to say, the Watsitumi resource personnel couldn’t tolerate such insubordination, but they had not yet concocted a rule they could enforce against her. Like any large corporate force, they micro-managed her for months, building their case. At her quarterly review, she was dismissed on a series of trumped up charges. George could feel the crushing of the human spirit throughout the building as she was led out of the facilities by a security guard. Because the folders were part of the Watsitumi office supplies, all of the Jimmys artfully crafted into the office thrum, sat abandoned in the cubicle.

Though his own poster was a much milder attempt at bucking the system, he rarely looked at that sparkling Tartan sailboat anymore. It hurt too much. It was like a broken promise. His focus was on the call log, the callers on hold, and a status which, in real-time, rated him against all of the other “phone technicians.” He had to work hard to maintain a yellow-green status, which on Fridays, would often slip into the orange status. He was struggling to be average.

Click.

Buzz.

Click.

“Hello, this is Watsitumi Corporation, my name is George Forder. How may I help you today?” The tirade ensues. Expletives are fired off like Fourth of July fireworks. George heard the words but they melded with the day-long song of the other frustrated masses.

George learned to mentally disassociate himself from the work, while still engaging in the mechanics of the tasks at hand. Over time he had become invisible. He had become an automaton whose career goal didn’t extend beyond the next paycheck. He used to wake in the morning looking forward to going to work. There was a golden era in his career when he felt he was making a difference.



He received pats on the back from the owners in the early days of the company. But this inhuman world of nondescript cubicles was a far cry from his career origin.

He hadn't always worked for Watsitumi, but he also had never really changed jobs. Years ago, he started out as a sales representative for *Run-Rite Motors*. *Run-Rite* started as a garage business with a few buddies; Jim Dalburth and Craig Lang who dabbled with their hot-rods' motors. They tweaked and honed engines, often fabricating parts, when none were available, to get just the right compression ratios. They were the envy of the town and the bane of the police. But their weekend hobby taught them how to reverse engineer a production line motor and make it special. In those early years they made their money selling upgrade kits for Oldsmobile and Chevy engines.

The garage hobby turned into a business as friends and family wanted their cars fixed or some upgrade performed. Not satisfied, they started designing their own engine. The two owners were proud of their work and were interested in creating a motor that would last. When they hired George, Craig and Jim had wanted a person to assist with assembling the motors. As their popularity increased the three upgraded from a garage to a small warehouse. George was not an engineer, but he had enough "good ol' boy" in him that the two owners brought him in and taught him what made *Run-Rite Motors* "the best motor company there ever was." They showed him how they upgraded from rubber to high grade plastic bushings because they could withstand the heat better. They opened their blueprints, letting him see the tolerance levels for the piston shafts.

George believed in the solid, American-made, products. With the continued growth in the company, George moved from the manufacturing floor to marketing. He marketed *Run-Rite* from the heart and his enthusiasm was infectious. The popularity of *Run-Rite* made George's job easy. The burgeoning company made motors for everything from home air-conditioners to hand held tillers.

George was rewarded for his hard work. Every year they gave George a week off with pay. As the company grew, the two owners purchased a beautiful three bedroom cabin nestled near a lake. George could take his family to the cabin – gratis. He was surprised after one vacation getaway when, upon his return, he was introduced to three more people they hired. They were all brought on board to help expand the *Run-Rite* marketing umbrella. George thought he might be in charge of the crew, but the owners kept a tight rein, and he was now one of four promoting and proselytizing the benefits of the *Run-Rite* family.

With the advent of the expanded team, the company grew at an alarming rate and went international. *Run-Rite* was now making engines for cars and boats. They created generators which were used in hospitals, and high-tech industries. George moved from department to department as the company morphed into a giant beast. Marketing was now left to a third-party company of young entrepreneurs who could take advantage of the electronic world. The original owners, now multi-millionaires had left the company. They could be found in the business rags with a drink in one hand toasting their success on some paradise complete with palm trees and a tiki bar. If you took out the fat, balding men with their raised glass, the picture didn't look that different from the May picture of the tropical wonderland on George's calendar. They had made it. They were living the dream.

Eventually the company was bought by the Watsitumi Corporation and folded into one of the international pillars of global gluttony. Watsitumi now made motors. They also made condoms, dry wall, ketchup, and cell phones. The management that had been in place after the original two left was summarily dismissed as Watsitumi applied their philosophy of "promote from within" (after

brainwashing), assimilating *Run-Rite* into a grand machine of faceless bureaucracy. This leadership exodus left George with a great deal of company history under his belt, but his failure to rise in the ranks left him an unknown relic in the Watsitumi Company. He was considered too old and too overpaid for the skills he could offer. He had never been particularly adept at computers and he didn't understand the "personal advancement before business" mentality that drove this company. George moved from the accounting department to quality assurance. He was then moved to shipping. Not making a splash there, he was transferred to the complaint department. At each step he was met by a boss who was at least ten years his junior. None knew anything about motors. They couldn't tell you the difference between a drive shaft and a dipstick.

By the time he was assigned to the complaint department, he had given up on the stroll up the corporate ladder. He realized he could listen to the calls coming in, collect his salary, and make sure his pension was secure. But when he made that paradigm shift, it made its way into his home life, pervading and dampening his drive to do much of anything. Routine had once been convenient, but had now become necessary. Television became the balm that ate time one hour at a time. The dinner table was unused, in favor of the TV tray tables. Thursday was spaghetti night. The passion left and so did the sex. Work had castrated his life.

Click.

Buzz.

Click.

"Hello, this is Watsitumi Corporation, my name is George Forder. How may I help you today?"

George noticed the shoes, first. He had seen the shoes only on very rare occasions. These shoes were unlike any other shoes on the planet. It had become his habit to look down, so shoes became the first thing that he noticed when his cubicle space was invaded. These shoes were remarkable. The last time he saw these shoes was at a corporate pep rally. Of course he doubted these were the exact same shoes. How could they be? No shoes could remain looking as pristine as these. George's shoes had the distinct marks of a man who bends his toes in the process of walking. Occasionally he scuffed his shoes so George's shoes looked normal. But these... there were no scuff marks. There was no "bend" in the shoes indicating that anyone had walked in them. They had a black sheen so bright that you could brush your teeth and fix your hair in their reflection. They were the shoes of none other than the Headquarter's CEO, Mr. Ishiri.

This was an unexpected visit. Mr. Ishiri was way too important to visit George. Should he stand and shake his hand? Should he bow? There was a cultural crisis in the making and George was unprepared. George just sat there well aware of the presence of this important man dressed in the perfect black suit and red tie.

"Yes, sir. I understand that the investigation of the fire indicated that the source was the engine. We need to determine if you have a record of its maintenance. In order to fill out a claim and find fault we need to prove that you properly maintained the engine according to the specifications in the manual."

The expletives flew, as they always did. What followed was the string of words that he had heard a thousand times from a thousand disgruntled customers. Sue., bring you down., destroyed my...,

fucking idiots..., morons..., piece of shit engine..., could have killed.... George looked up and tried to smile toward the door. He hoped none of the words he was hearing in his earpiece would pollute the otherwise perfect Mr. Ishiri. While the earpiece blasted with the “chorus of love”, George’s head started spinning with the idea that his day had come. His seniority, good work, and diligence would pay off. Mr. Ishiri was here to recognize someone who had been there nearly from the start.

The key phrase came. George was hoping to get this one, because it meant the end of the conversation was at hand.

“Call my lawyer and he’ll...”

“Sir,” started George, picking up the response he had learned from the training manual. “Since you have indicated that you will be using a lawyer, it is my responsibility to inform you that he needs to contact us here at Watsitumi. We should have no further discussion because of the legal ramifications of your actions against the company. Note that calls are recorded and can be used in a court of law. Thank you for choosing Watsitumi. Good day.”

Click.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

George stood up. He decided to try a modified cultural synthesis by offering his hand and performing a short bow. This way he had his international code of conduct bases covered. But Mr. Ishiri neither responded with the outstretched hand nor returned the awkward bow. George left his hand out way too long hoping that Mr. Ishiri hadn’t noticed the plump fingers jutting out in his direction. The space between them seemed to have suddenly grown cold. What had started as butterflies of excitement in George’s stomach turned to lead weights of dread.

“Mr. Forder,” started Mr. Ishiri - the words seemed long and drawn out. At least Mr. Ishiri had gotten his name right.

“Yes sir, it is a pleasure to see you today, sir,” replied George as he slowly lowered his hand, hoping that no one would notice its awkward placement. George glanced back and saw that his real-time effectiveness screen had gone from green to yellow.

Buzz. Buzz.

“Mr. Forder,” said Mr. Ishiri again. He said it as though that was a complete statement. He said it as though nothing more needed to be said. George wanted more, but Mr. Ishiri seemed content simply to repeat the name. George sat back down. This seemed to be the catalyst to get Mr. Ishiri out of the name repetition mode.

Mr. Ishiri refused to enter the cubicle but stood just outside the invisible line that divided the hallway and George’s personal space. The CEO didn’t lean up against the partition. Of course he wouldn’t. George doubted that Mr. Ishiri ever leaned, slouched, or crossed his legs. This would cause creases in his suit, and maybe cause him to bend his shoes in some way that resembled a normal human being.

“We have been reviewing our records and found that you have been doing an adequate job here at Watsitumi.”

For a second, George paused. First he wondered who “we” were. There was only Mr. Ishiri, yet he was talking in the plural, as though he was a man of such importance that he occupied more than one space in the physical realm. But these seemed like words of encouragement and George dare not interrupt.

“But we strive for *excellence*. Do you agree?”

“Oh, yes, I agr...”

Mr. Ishiri continued as though George had not even attempted a reply.

“Therefore, we need to make sure that our company works at a level which exceeds the ordinary. You have been with the company for some time, yes?”

George opened his mouth to reply, but paused, wondering if that had actually been a question. His hunch was correct. Mr. Ishiri continued his prepared speech without a hint of recognition that George was even present in the cubicle.

“And your records demonstrate that you have been average. Yet you’re paid a good salary, well beyond that of your peers. We feel that we cannot reward average work with above average compensation. In these economic times, we need to present ourselves as a lean and mean entity, worthy of our world stature.”

George could feel what was coming. His mind was scrambling at the avalanche that was falling in his world. As Mr. Ishiri went on with his diatribe, George was trying to quickly assemble a case for his continued employment.

“... years we have established high marks... better than our competition... grown when other companies have...”

George didn’t comprehend anything anymore. He was too busy panicking. The words finally came at the end of a speech put together with the finesse of a Chopin piano concerto.

“...we are going to have to let you go.”

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

George’s electronic performance rating was now a deep orange. His face was much redder than the orange tint of the performance indicator which was beginning to blink. He thought of standing up but wondered if his knees had magically been replaced by jiggling jellyfish. If he could stand, George was taller than Mr. Ishiri and would present an imposing figure. But that might be considered a threat and George was not a violent man. In fact, he wondered how much of a man was left in him.

“I have put in a great deal of service here at *Run-Rite*...” George quickly caught himself. “... er Watsitumi and have been...”

Mr. Ishiri put up his hand and cocked his head as though these words were blocked by some invisible force-field. George decided to take the offensive.

“What about Arnold?” asked George, pointing to a cubicle three rows back. He opted to pick Arnold because he was a social butterfly who spent much of his time going from cubicle to cubicle talking to the other employees – mostly women. Arnold would relay the Monday sports statistics with the passion of a reverend and the accuracy of a Wall Street banker to anyone with whom he had made eye contact. George knew Arnold cheated on the lunch breaks and took an extra five to ten minutes each day. “My work is as good, if not better, than his.”

“He is black.”

The words were as offensive as they were unexpected. The nature of the response was so foreign to George that he couldn't muster a reply. George spent time trying to calculate a response. He wondered how to argue with this odd little man with the perfect suit and perfect shoes. Why had Mr. Ishiri personally come to let him go? Why not bring out the floor manager to do the job? There was the hint of a smirk in the face of this otherwise stolid figure. Somewhere, deep in his heart, was the evil pleasure of destroying someone else's life.

“But I have been faithful...”

As if summoned from some unseen directive, a security guard appeared.

“You must leave immediately. You will be escorted out. Please remove any personal belongings...”

George looked at the cubicle and tried to assess what was his. It was all his. This was his world. For six years, this was all his - all of it. He gathered his family photos. He went to take down the calendar.

“That is company property. It came from the store,” said the guard. “Do you have a receipt for it?” The palm tree seemed to hang lower in dismay over the green and blue water. Of course George didn't have a receipt. The images June, July or August would remain unrevealed.

George took down the poster of the Tartan 4100 sailboat. The security guard snorted. George left the thumbtacks on the desk. Only then did he notice that Mr. Ishiri had vaporized shortly after the appearance of the security guard. Of course Mr. Ishiri didn't *walk* away. How could he? He would have bent his shoes.

As George took his cardboard box with the few remnants of his corporate life and walked down the aisle toward the exit, he felt the perspiration around his head and neck grow cold. There was a moment when his vision had narrowed as if he was looking through a toilet roll. He was hyperventilating and there was a single musical note in his brain, growing in intensity, and causing his vision to go blue. A few heads popped out from behind the cubicle, like dogs in the pound poking their snouts through the cage to get a better glimpse of the outside world, each one never breaking dialogue with the person on the other line.

“Hello, this is Watsitumi Corporation, my name is...”

As George opened the door leading to the parking lot, a hot shaft of sun broke through the ever widening crease between inside and outside. Unknown to George, back at his cubicle, his real-time personal effectiveness monitor had gone from orange to deep red.

## 2

Dread. Dread seeped through George's blood as he put his box representing the entirety of his corporate life into the trunk of his car. The dread didn't diminish as the security guard kept a silent watch from the entrance. He didn't want George to "key" anyone's car, or worse, come back with a revolver. With cold indifference the guard stood unmoving, arms folded, waiting until George peacefully pulled away. The dread seeped through George like some cold medical concoction sent through an IV bag. At certain points, the dread kicked off the "oh my God" syndrome.

His first "oh my God" thought was, "Oh my God, how am I going to tell Alicia?"

This was soon followed by, "Oh my God, we are going to lose our house."

Almost simultaneously came, "Oh my God, Daniel won't be able to continue his college education."

The "oh my God" trickled to more mundane issues like:

"Oh my God, I need to turn off the sprinkler system."

"Oh my God, I just bought \$200 worth of groceries."

"Oh my God, there are three loads of dirty laundry."

The cycle of the "oh my God" phrase replayed itself with increasing rapidity and volume inside George's head, mixed with the slushy-stirry sound of the blood that was now pumping between his ears at four times the pressure than one hour earlier. George had arrived at that point of panic and dread where he suddenly felt he was no longer himself and had been replaced by a mannequin or robot that he was now trying to control. George started the car and even this simple operation took an incredible effort of will as he mentally calculated each step. It was as if this was some new activity he had never performed. He wondered, for the briefest moment, if this was the kind of feeling stroke patients had when their brains were rewired and the mental instruction to "lift your left foot" resulted in a "left elbow jab." The good news was that George had not gotten to the point of asking God to forgive him his sins and he had not started reciting the Lord's Prayer like some Buddhist mantra.

As he sat immobile, bemoaning his current state, the car was getting hot to the point where small dogs would have been slobbering and gasping for their last breath. He knew he had to leave the property, but where would he go? His first thought was to go home. No one was there.

Alicia wouldn't return for a few hours. When Daniel was in elementary school, she volunteered to help. After he graduated to the higher learning of junior high, Alicia chose to stay at the school. She liked little kids. They listened (mostly). They liked and respected grown-ups (mostly). And, they seemed to have some creative spark that junior high and high school tends to extinguish. She would fill the dinner table with stories about these little kids doing some incredible ninety-degree kind of thinking. He tried to lose himself in last night's conversation. It was an effort of will to try and focus on some pleasant thought in an effort to suppress the monster that seemed to be taking over his body.

"...so Justin told me that he had to use the bathroom. Of course when we hear that request, we don't hesitate, especially with someone like Justin. Otherwise, we would be sending him home wrapped

in a towel. So I send him down the hall, to make sure he gets to the restroom okay. And then, from the bathroom, I hear this screaming. I had no idea what was going on. I run down the hall thinking the worst." Alicia put her hands on her ears in a mock sign of distress.

"Well, it *is* the boy's room and there are strict rules about a female entering the boy's room. But the screaming seems to be getting even louder. I wondered if someone had snuck in there. Luckily, Mr. Thompson, the fourth grade teacher, had heard it too. He came running down the hall, and opens the door. "

Alicia paused for dramatic effect.

"And there is little Justin, standing on the booster box, washing his hands, screaming the alphabet at the top of his lungs."

"What are you doing?" asked Mr. Thompson. The teacher had the door opened wide enough so I could sneak a peek and see what Justin was doing. The kid had soap and water everywhere."

That beautiful little smirk only Alicia could give curled on the ends of her mouth.

"So Justin says 'Mama told me to wash my hands after I pee. She said that I had to say the alphabet real loud because my hands aren't clean until I do the whole alphabet. She wanted me to say it real loud so she could hear me because that is how long it takes to get them clean, but I could only get up to 'S' and I forgot where I was so I had to start over. Three times..."

George remembered laughing, though his current predicament prevented anything close to mirth from rising to the surface. But the memory was locked in place and he wanted to replay this scene with as much clarity as his brain would allow.

"Mr. Thompson helped Justin down from the booster box, turned the little guy's hands over a couple of times and said, 'Yep, you got all the germs this time. I don't see any there. Good job.' He turned to me and winked. I thought I was going to die laughing!"

The fragment of memory died much too quickly for George and he failed to conjure any other pleasant memory. As he turned the corner and saw his house down the street his stomach took the express elevator to his balls. The "oh my God" audio remix started replaying down the street and up the driveway.

He loved Alicia very much. Otherwise what came next would not hurt so badly. If he didn't care for his family, the loss of his job would be a glitch in an otherwise banal life. But he cared for them. He loved his son. Family was important. In this mental turmoil, he reflected over the last few years. He wondered if he hurt them through neglect over the last few years. He assumed that because nothing happened, everything was okay. But the "status quo" might have been the slow death in their relationship. He couldn't remember the last time he and Alicia had made love. He couldn't recollect the last time he heard her express any romantic words for him. Neither had he started or ended his day with a simple "I love you." There was an implied devotion for one another. But the silent fog of complacency eroded away what was once a healthy marriage. "Keeping an even keel" meant doing nothing at all. No vacation. No surprises. No romance. Nothing.



He sat in the kitchen and waited. This was the communal hub of the house. Bills were paid here. Decisions were made here. It is here where they broke bread; they never ate in the dining room. The kitchen was the heart of home. So there he sat. Time had become totally meaningless to George. It would be hours before Alicia came home, but that was immaterial. The movement of the sunshine through the sheers onto the kitchen table moved like a cat as it stalked its unwary prey. He would just sit. George was experiencing the opposite of exercise. When one exercised, the mind becomes still as the body goes through its exertion. George, however, was training for the Olympic angst trials. Sitting there, he spun out a cascade of worst case scenarios. At one point he cried, though he didn't know when he started crying, or when he stopped. He reached a guilt ridden transcendental state which included red and puffy eyeballs.

He thought about Alicia. She was still quite beautiful. She had cut her brunette hair short. It was grey around the temples. She had not attempted to cover up the indicators of her age and he was happy for that. The spots where the hair had lightened resembled angel wings. He told her that and she simply responded, "Well they need to be a little bigger to get this fat ass off the ground." Yes, she had gained weight, but she was nowhere near being fat. It was a product of a "good life." They had become sedentary, entering into their routine almost unconsciously, being slowly roasted by comforts and always easing into the path of least resistance.

Now, with the loss of his job, their routine would be broken. George felt he had been stripped of his manhood. George tried to live the life of a typical American man. He went to work on time. He came home after a hard day of work. He ate bacon. He watched reruns. He had put in years with a company as a good and loyal servant. And, until now, he had covered himself with the warm and cozy blanket of triviality.

For a moment he pondered the social difference between men and women. He leaned toward the fifties style "Honeymooners role" of "supporter of the family" – "the bread winner" – and the "Man of the house." Society, over the last forty years, changed some of the roles, but much of the social difference between men and women persisted. George didn't sew, nor had he ever beaten egg whites. Alicia had never taken out the garbage or changed the oil in a car. At parties, George noticed that men and women differed in their greeting. Introductions to strangers differed for men and women. Women, after sharing names, would ask "how many children do you have?" Men, however, immediately targeted, "So what do you do for a living?"

George had always answered, "I am a sales-rep for Run-Rite Motors." He said this with pride. His chest stuck out a little more because this was an American company. His answer was like raising the American flag, or opening his shirt to reveal the "S" emblazoned on his blue superman suit. When *Run-Rite* was bought out by Watsitumi, his entire demeanor changed. He tried to avoid the question altogether.

Yet, when the unavoidable question was raised, he hung his head and answered, "Oh, I just work for a multi-national company that makes engines."

He refused to say Watsitumi. If the odd moment came when he did have to utter the name of the company, he tried to do it in a quick and subdued manner hoping the response would be ignored if not heard. However, if the inquirer pressed him for clarification, George knew he would have to repeat his answer, complete with the Watsitumi name carefully pronounced. What followed would always be some stupid retort.

