

DAVID J. HORN'S

HARD LABOR



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Front cover art is from the film *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) © Warner Bros.

For all the working stiffs
who can't stand working.

HARD LABOR

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THE UNEMPLOYABLES

Jamie Dropping had some issues. His wife's ghost haunted him; he was certain that he was being secretly investigated by the police; and now he had lost his job.

His therapist had told him that losing his job was a chance to reincarnate himself. It was a new beginning. Then she gave him a long lecture about the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. “Just before the soul of dead person is recycled and reborn in a new body, the soul has the ability to choose which womb-door to re-enter life through. Choosing the womb-door is critical: it is the difference between being reborn a human or a tapeworm.”

Jamie found the whole womb-door theory a real bummer. He was expecting sympathy from his therapist, even false sympathy. But instead he had to settle for the womb-door. His therapist instructed with bubblegum

exuberance, “All you need to do is find your womb-door.”

All the talk about wombs and entry and re-entry began to make Jamie feel slightly uncomfortable. His palms were sweaty and his mouth tasted chalky. He even began to wonder if the womb-door was therapist code for sex. Maybe this was the way psychoanalysts flirted with their patients. Maybe it was an invitation? Maybe it was a test?

But Jamie found his therapist repulsive. She had a body like Hefty garbage bag filled with grass clippings. She rarely smiled but when she did, she displayed a mouthful of brown uneven teeth. She wore thick glasses that made her eyes seem like enormous insect eyes. But worst of all was her hair. Her hair always looked as if it had just landed on her head after flying across the Atlantic. While his therapist talked about womb-doors, much to Jamie's chagrin, his imagination began to play a film featuring him and his therapist engaged in an awkward and lusty act of fornication. Jamie cringed. He tried to censor the onslaught of images by reciting the alphabet in reverse. That didn't work, so he began to ponder baseball statistics. He thought about lint and socks, parking meters, anything completely asexual. But nothing worked. By the end of the session, he was imagining himself in nothing but a pair of socks, licking the lint out of his therapist's belly button while she was leaning against a parking meter.

On his drive home, Jamie concluded he definitely needed a new analyst. Someone a little less interested in

eastern metaphysics.

As fate would have it, a couple sessions later, Jamie's therapist cut the cord. Because he had no job, and money was tight, he had asked her if he could pay for therapy once he found work.

She thought about this for a long silent moment. "Are you looking for a job?" she asked.

"Of course," he lied.

She was pensive. "Something gives me the impression that you aren't really interested in finding your womb-door. Is that true?"

"Well, I have to admit I'm a bit confused about the whole womb-door thing."

"What are you confused about?"

Jamie really hadn't given much serious thought to the idea of a womb-door. But he had absentmindedly wondered if the whole womb-door concept was behind the sitcom *Gilligan's Island*. He explained his theory, "Every episode begins with the hope of rebirth – a plan to escape from the uncharted island – and every episode ends with the collapse of their plans because Gilligan would bumble the deal. It seems that the message of the show is, *Don't find your womb-door. Stay lost at sea.*"

Jamie's therapist considered *Gilligan's Island* a travesty of American Culture. It, like all sitcoms, demonstrated the septic tank depth of the average American's IQ. She said with venomous condescension, "I don't understand what a 1960's sitcom about a boob named

Gilligan has to do with you and your womb-door.”

She had now used the words *boob* and *womb* in the same sentence. Jamie's immigration fired-up the projector. Soon there was another flood of stomach turning sex scenes. Jamie looked away and said, “Do you want to have sex with me?”

His therapist was pensive again. Jamie could never read what she was thinking. She always had a black and white rorschach look in her eyes.

Her gaze directed Jamie's attention to a painting hanging from the wall adjacent to her desk. He had *seen* this painting in a thousand therapy sessions. A watercolor of a butterfly. But now he *really* saw it. He suddenly realized it was not the insect paradigm of metamorphosis. It was actually a vagina. The womb.

“You know, I don't think I'll be able to help you any longer,” said the therapist – barely opening her mouth as she spoke.

Jamie squinted at the picture, to get a better look. Maybe it was just a cave.

And that was his last session.

Jamie Dropping, besides being jobless, was now an analysand without an analyst, which made him feel like a stray dog soaked from a terrifying thunder storm, like a shopping cart abandoned in a vacant lot. He felt directionless, a million miles from home. Lost.

He spent his waking hours in brutal self-examination. He revisited his past, pulled the skeletons

from his closets and interrogated his former selves for some sort of solace, for an explanation. He just wanted to be happy being Jamie Dropping. But the only truth he was able to unearth was that he was a failure. A loser. Someone without any redeeming quality. A schlemiel. A rube. He perpetrated his own failure.

Jamie then decided that he had enough. Thinking exhausted him, and surviving was killing him. He was not the type who could slit his wrists or hang himself. He had no choice but to hang-on. But hanging-on made him feel nauseous. So he squandered his time sitting on the edge of his couch in the living room of his apartment, slightly nauseous, the curtains drawn. He would sit in the darkness, remote control in hand, and he would watch TV. It rained its images on Jamie Dropping and his waking hours were washed away with canned laughter and phony applause: *Happy Days, The Andy Griffith Show, The Beverly Hillbillies, The Jeffersons, Gilligan's Island, Different Strokes, Family Ties, Threes Company, The Munsters, Sanford and Son, The Adams Family, Mr. Ed, The Brady Bunch, Bewitched, I Dream of Jeannie, I love Lucy, Leave it to Beaver, My Three Sons...*

He watched and thought vaguely about the womb-door. He knew full well that Gilligan and Skipper would never find their womb-door. Lucy and Ethel, the Beaver, Richie Cunningham, George Jefferson, Jethro, and all the others, were all looking for their womb-doors, but the Law of the half-hour American sitcom was very clear: finding the womb-door is not good comedy.

One day Jamie's only friend, Howard Strangula, called him. Howard and Jamie had been friends since high school, although Jamie never really liked Howard at all. He considered Howard an emotional leech and tolerated his random interruptions in his life as existential flat tires.

Howard Strangula was also jobless, but unlike Jamie, he wasn't whittling his existence away watching reruns and pining for his womb-door. Howard was an entrepreneur. Sure, he was lazy, but in an ambitious way. "I want to talk to you about this great business venture," he told Jamie.

"What is it?" Jamie could smell a pyramid scheme through the phone.

"Well, I don't want to talk about it over the phone. You never know who's listening."

"Didn't you call me to talk about it?"

"I just wanted to tell you we should talk about it. But not now. Not over the phone."

"I really don't think anyone is listening," Jamie didn't even want to be part of the conversation.

"Don't you remember what happened to Billy Murdel?"

"Billy Murdel?" the name was vaguely familiar.

"From high school. You don't remember Billy Murdel?"

"No."

"Come on. The real loser. The red haired kid with

braces.”

“Billy Murdel?” Jamie recalled a kid with red hair and braces. “You mean the kid with the knobby knees who always smelled like a gas station?”

“Could've been. I don't usually look at boys knees. Anyway, he was talking on the phone about someone he shouldn't, and the next day he found his testicles in the freezer.”

“What do you mean he found his testicles in the freezer?”

“He found his testicles in the freezer,” repeated Howard.

“So, one day Billy Murdel went to get some ice-cubes and he said, 'Oh look there are my testicles.' Don't you think he would have realized before he opened the freezer that his testicles were missing?”

Howard sighed, “We shouldn't be talking about this over the phone.”

Jamie closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. Talking to Howard was always an infuriating business. Then he asked, “Howard, why do you call me to talk about things you can't talk about over the phone?”

Howard cleared his throat and said in complete monotone, “I'm inviting you into a dialogue, Jamie. Come over to my place tomorrow and we can talk it over. That's all.”

The next day, Jamie reluctantly set off for Howard's apartment. He was far from his psychological best. He

felt nauseous and the whole ordeal of driving seemed like an enormous illogical hassle. Stop signs, traffic, red lights, yellow lights, green lights, flashing yellow lights, dotted lines, solid lines, turn signals, turning lanes, windshield wipers were all part of a sadistic plot invented solely to torture him. He just wanted to sit in his living room and watch *Gilligan's Island*.

But Jamie could never say *No* to Howard and for some reason always obediently did whatever Howard wanted him to do. Jamie cursed himself for being such a coward as he slid the key into the ignition. Why couldn't he just tell Howard to go screw himself? Why did he always do the things that made him miserable?

Jamie drove cautiously. He didn't exceed 32 miles per hour even though the speed limit was 45. Behind him was a long line of impatient traffic. Every driver and passenger stuck in that line was irritated by the subnormally slow speed. Behind Jamie was an old man driving a beat up 1976 Dodge Eris. He rode Jamie's ass and honked viciously. Jamie could see the old man in his rear view mirror. He had stringy grey hair, blown wild by the wind. He was giving Jamie the finger and screaming at him, although Jamie couldn't hear what he was screaming. He quietly cursed the old man, "I'm not feeling well you old fucker."

Jamie thought old people were a nuisance, but old people that putted around impatiently trying to get somewhere before the end were pathetic. They had wasted all their lives, and now in the waning years they

were in a hurry to get to the pharmacy to buy laxatives. He found it disgusting that the old man didn't simply stay at home watching *The Young and the Restless* until he kicked the bucket.

The whole ten mile drive to Howard's apartment was an epic journey greater than Dante's excursion through hell. As he pulled into Howard's apartment complex he felt like a half dead goldfish floating in the toilet bowl just prior the final flush.

Jamie parked his car and cursed Howard, "GOD DAMNED IDIOT." He hated Howard because he couldn't say *No* to him. It didn't make sense, but that's how he felt. He hated himself for always doing what Howard asked him to do. It was another of his failures: he was a pathetic yes man - a coward, afraid of the word *no*. He sat in the car simmering with self consuming rage.

Jamie also hated Howard because he was always blabbing about his supposedly superior IQ. But Howard had the EQ of a handful of gravel. He talked and talked, but he never listened. He didn't give a damn about what Jamie felt or thought. He just needed something or someone to fill the profound lack in his super-sized ego. Jamie was Howard's "lack-filler," and he knew that Howard didn't empathize with him. Whenever Jamie hung out with Howard, he always felt even more isolated and alone. And that's why Jamie really hated Howard.

Jamie dragged his feet to Howard's apartment

building and rang the buzzer.

“Who is it?” crackled a voice from the intercom.

Jamie said nothing. He frowned bitterly and pressed the buzzer again violently, imagining that he was shoving his thumb into one of Howard's eyes.

The door clicked open and Jamie marched up the stairs to Howard's apartment. The door was open, and Howard was standing in the doorway, wearing a shirt that read, *No Work, No School, No Problem!* The shirt was small and it didn't completely cover Howard's gut. It ended just prior to his hairy bellybutton. Jamie was disgusted by the sight of it.

“Hi Jamie,” said Howard.

“So, what's your stupid business plan,” snapped Jamie.

“I've got a great plan,” bubbled Howard.

Before going into the plan, Howard asked if Jamie wanted a cup of coffee which he declined with the wave of a hand. Howard sipped at his coffee, making loud slurping noises. Jamie sank into the couch and stared at the ceiling.

“You know what I've been doing?”

Jamie said nothing.

“I've been spending a lot of time looking for the missing me.”

“Great.”

“I've relocated a lot of people who were important to me. I've found all my high school friends on Facebook. I

began to get nostalgic for the good ol' days. You know, the glory days. That's why I dug this shirt out of storage. What do you think?"

Glory days? Howard, obviously had a strange understanding of the word *glory*. Unless Howard thought being duct taped in the shower of the boys locker room was a glorious experience. Howard had obviously forgotten that they were picked on relentlessly in high school.

"So, I've been chatting with the guys from high school every now and then. Did you know that Jorge Powers is an actor and he played the transvestite in the movie *The Sludge Factory*?"

The idea that Jorge Powers had managed to succeed, if playing the part of a transvestite could be counted as success, made Jamie feel like an insect scuttling across the filth and dirt of his own failure. He felt buried beneath a lifetime of loserdom. How in the hell had Jorge Powers managed to become anything? Jamie hated Jorge Powers even more than he had when they were both in high school.

"So you probably want to see my business plan?"

"Oh, yeah," yawned Jamie.

Howard raced to the bedroom and closed the door.

While Jamie waited on the couch, his thoughts were flaming arrows all fired at Howard. Howard had reached a new all time low. Jamie was on a quest for his womb-door, a chance of rebirth and reincarnation while Howard was clinging to a previous incarnation of himself from a

humiliating acne-faced-smelly-arpitted period known as high school.

“Are you friends with Billy Murdel?” Jamie shouted to Howard.

“No. The bastard hasn't accepted my friend request.”

Billy Murdel, thought Jamie. He closed his eyes and pulled Billy's face from his mind. Red hair. Thin as a rail. Braces. Acne. Dandruff. He was picked on all the time. There was a linebacker named Blane Dongle that made it his daily duty to terrorize and embarrass Billy Murdel.

Jamie sighed, *What the hell is taking Howard so long?* He wondered. Then he closed his eyes and he drifted back to high school.

He revisited the sloppy stench of the cafeteria and a couple of insipid classrooms. The faces of the boys that traumatized him, and the girls that ridiculed him for no good reason, came in and out of focus. He saw the girls that he adored, but never had the courage to speak to, fluttering in the hallways. Missed opportunities. Then he found himself in the sultry armpit of the boys locker room quickly pulling on his jock strap before any of the other boys could see his dick.

“So what do you think?” asked Howard.

Jamie opened his eyes and saw Howard standing in front of him wearing an enormous refrigerator box that had been spray painted silver. The box had some blue knobs and red buttons glued in random groups on the front

of it. Howard's face was also painted silver and it protruded from a hole in the front of the box, and two holes were cut into the sides for his arms.

“Hello little boy would you like to shake hands with Roborob?” Howard spoke and moved mechanically. He stuck his hand out for Jamie to shake.

Jamie recoiled and asked, “What the hell is this?”

“I'm a robot. I stand outside the science center. The kids really go for this type of crap. It's a great gig.”

“You want me to dress up like a robot?” Jamie began to feel faint.

“No. I want you take the photos.” Howard clumsily maneuvered through his living room, knocking into furniture, looking for his Polaroid camera. He found it buried beneath some bills and coupons. He handed it to Jamie.

“Sometimes parents give me a buck or some pocket change for letting them take a picture of their kid standing next to me. But, if you take the photos, then I can charge a couple of bucks for each one. They get a souvenir and our profits are up 150%. Everyone's happy,” Howard effervesced.

“*Our* profits?”

“Believe me we can make a shitload doing this. And we'll split everything sixty forty. What do you think?”

Jamie understood he was the forty of the equation. “It sounds awful.”

“Listen, don't decide anything now, just come out

with me today and then make your decision.”

“This is an awful idea,” Jamie echoed. But he couldn't say *no*.

Jamie didn't have the psychological stamina to get behind the wheel and the drive to science center, so Howard volunteered to drive. But before going downtown he wanted to make a stop at the party store for some “refreshments.”

Jamie waited in the car. He stared out the window thinking about the different ways in which people committed suicide. He thought about the people from his grandfather's generation who would jump off bridges. Drowning seemed so barbaric. Suicide required a type of bravery that Jamie did not possess.

He saw Howard standing at the cash register and his mind drifted to murder. Maybe he could murder Howard in some way that made it look like an accident. He wondered if he could convince the police that Howard had driven over himself accidentally.

Howard returned with two cans of beer. “I usually have a beer. It helps calm the nerves. And check this out.” Howard pulled out a pack of straws and a couple of rubbery can sleeves that had Pepsi written on them from the glove box. “This way it doesn't look like we're drinking beers. It looks like we're drinking sodas.”

“It's against the law to drink in public.” Jamie didn't bring up the fact that it was only 9:30 in the morning.

“That's the whole point. With our beer disguise kits,

no one would ever suspect that we're drinking.”

“Beer disguise kits?”

“Do you think Donald Trump can't drink wherever the hell he wants?”

“We aren't Donald Trump.”

“Not yet.”

Howard smiled. Jamie frowned.

The rest of the drive, Jamie suffered Howard's ridiculous theory of the letter aitch. Howard was excited and when he was excited he became garrulous.

“You know, one day, I suddenly realized that the building where I worked was shaped like an enormous **H**. The **aitch**, Jamie: two legs connected by a bridge, beginning just past the **G** with H-Bomb and ending prior to the **I** with hysterics. It's not a good letter.”

Jamie sighed and rolled his eyes. Howard had obviously been rehearsing this little speech.

“Ah the **aitch** - articulated with the epiglottis against the back of the pharynx - the voiceless breath of the letter **aitch**. It is a seemingly innocent letter, as are most letters, with the exception of the **double-u**, but in the mouths and minds of the wicked it can be a letter of cruel design.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I once saw an episode of the Hugh Proton Show about the Antichrist. One of the guest panelists claimed that the letter **aitch** was the Antichrist. This guy said that the letter **aitch** was actually the brains behind John

Hinckley's attempted assassination of Ronald Wilson Reagan.”

“Oh, for the love of God. How can a letter be the Antichrist?”

Howard ignored the question, “And the **aitch** was also the address of the cellblock where some of the worst female criminals in the history of Australian Television spent their 692 episodes of life. *Prisoner: Cell Block H*. Don't tell me you never watched *Cell Bock H*.”

Jamie couldn't believe the stupidity of the monologue. He sulked and stared out the window. He imagined that a giant letter *H* was terrorizing the streets of downtown. Stepping on families that didn't have enough sense to stay off the streets. It was *Sesame Street* meets Sam Peckinpah; the Cookie Monster, Bert and Ernie, Grover, Kermit all being crushed by the letter aitch.

Howard couldn't find a parking spot near the science center, and he didn't want to spend any money on parking, so they circled and circled the science center, hunting for a spot. Jamie was ready to strangle Howard on the third go-round.

“What makes you think you're going to find a spot, this time? Why don't we just park in the parking lot?”

“I'm not going to pay to park.”

Howard suddenly saw a car pull out of a spot. He pulled in, but it was a handicapped spot.

“You can't park here,” sighed Jamie.

“Who say's I can't park here?”

“It's a handicapped spot.”

“Have you ever seen a handicapped person in the science center?”

“The last time I was at the science center I think I was ten.”

Howard continued, “And that guy that just pulled out, was he handicapped?”

Jamie hadn't paid much attention to the car leaving. “How would I know?”

“Well, he wasn't unless hemorrhoids is a handicap.”

As they exited Howard's air conditioned car, Jamie suddenly recalled why he hated downtown. He always found it oppressively hot, even in the winter. Hell had to be cooler. He looked into the sky and squinted. The sun was somewhere up there but it was impossible to tell where. It was obscured behind a hazy wall of miserable silver clouds.

Howard marched in the direction of the science center, carrying a small bag and dragging the enormous silver box. Jamie followed at a distance.

“Jamie, we are the chosen few. We no longer have to spend our lives doing some job we hate. You and me are free men. Free from the office and from the computer. Free from emails. Free from boss' that have their heads up their asses...”

Howard stopped at a small grassy patch just outside the science center. “This...this Jamie, is my new office. This is where Roborob comes to life. Hey, lets

have a drink to celebrate.”

Howard cracked his beer and took a suck through the straw. Jamie did the same. He didn't want any beer but he figured it was easier to just drink it rather than argue with Howard about drinking beer in public. Jamie took a long drink through the straw.

Howard put out an empty Maxwell House Coffee can. He dropped a couple dollars in the can and some change. “Do you have a couple bucks for the can? People are more likely to give money when they believe someone else has already given. No one wants to be first. It's psychological.”

Jamie reached into his pocket. He had exactly 2 dollars and 78 cents. He put a dollar into the can.

“During the week things can be pretty slow, but the security guard inside, Juan, he tips me off. He told me that there would be a field trip today. If you play a field trip right, it can be a goldmine.”

Howard put on the box.

“Now you're a shark. Don't loiter around with the camera, just wait. Once you see the kids around me you attack. Take a picture and try to give it to one of the kids. That's the key. Make sure they take the photo. If you put the photo in their hands – they'll most likely buy it because they want to be left alone. It's that simple.”

Howard prepared himself. He put on the silver box, did some deep breathing exercises and then asked Jamie to give him another sip from his “soda.” Jamie reluctantly

held the straw up to Howard's lips so he could take a drink. Then, Howard stood perfectly still.

Some people in a hurry to get to work filed past, taking no notice of him. Jamie stood a good 20 feet away from him near a park bench where a flock of little old ladies were throwing out bird seed for some pigeons. One of the pigeons climbed on his shoe and took a shit.

A school bus arrived and a swarm of children exited. They were screaming and shouting. Jamie disliked children more than old people. He looked at them as if they were a bunch of runny nosed, budding neuroses. Sociopaths in training. Although Jamie had no idea what age this group of children were, he assumed that they were only a few years away from diapers. Disgusting. The kids ran to Howard, and he started to move his arms up and down mechanically.

“Hello kids, my name is Roborob.”

“Look! A robot,” shouted a chorus of kids who all shared the same subnormal intellect.

“It's just a man dressed like a robot,” said a skinny little girl with a black eye patch covering one eye.

The teacher stumbled from the bus. She looked frazzled. She tried to count the kids as they jumped around Howard and gave up after a few attempts. A couple of parents accompanying the class field trip also exited the bus behind the teacher.

The teacher pulled her camera from her purse. “OK class, everyone gather around the robot and I'll take a picture.”

"No pictures please. I have my own cameraman. Only \$2.00 for a photo," Jamie arrived on cue and limply displayed the Polaroid camera to the teacher.

She looked at Jamie as if he was trying to peddle his soiled underwear. "It's OK. I'll take a picture myself."

"Listen lady. You need to pay for the photo," said Howard.

"It's just one photo for the classroom," insisted the teacher

"No money, no photo," said Howard breaking the so-called fourth wall and talking like Howard Strangula.

"Listen, I'll just take a photo. It's only two dollars," Jamie sniveled diplomatically.

"I'm not going to pay for a photograph," she snapped.

Howard turned his back to the teacher as she was getting ready to take a photo. **"NO MONEY, NO FUCKING PHOTO."**

All the kids oohed and awed when they heard the word *fuck*.

"Fine. Kids, come on Mr. Robot is being a real jerk."

The kids dispersed slowly. One of them, a chubby little kid with untied shoelaces tripped and knocked over Howard's disguised beer.

"God damn it. Watch where you're going you little retard."

Then one of the chaperones, a father with broad shoulders and muscular arms stepped forward, "Hey Robo Dork! I don't like the way you talked to the kids or the

teacher.”

Howard looked the father in the face and spat, “Listen Chumly, that clumsy little fucker kicked over my...”

Howard stopped and gave the father a closer look, “Are you Billy Murdel?”

The father was surprised. He looked closely at Howard. Howard gazed deeply into the other man's eyes. It was like two dogs meeting on the street, each sniffing the other's ass.

“Are you Howard Strangula?” asked the father.

“Billy you've really changed,” said Howard.

“Exquese me,” it was the other chaperone, a mother dressed for a funeral, “but I don like da langigde you been usin in da front of da chilren.”

“What language would that be lady, English?” Howard chuckled and nudged Billy Murdel with his elbow, winking at him.

The mother gasped, “You da trashbin of da u ess a.”

Hearing the name Billy Murdel, Jamie wandered over to get a look at him. Billy had in fact changed. He looked good. Healthy and fit. He was no longer the wedgified high school loser he once was.

“Billy, it's great to see you. Sorry to hear about your...ahem...” Jamie leaned closer to Billy and said, “testicles.”

The mother overheard the word *testicles* and gasped again. She looked at Billy Murdel, “Why dees men talk to you abut you privarts?”

Billy Murdel tried to smile, "Listen you two are really beginning to piss me off. You were complete morons in high school and look at you now: dressed up like robots, picking on third graders and drinking beers with straws."

A small mob of onlookers began to gather around Jamie, Howard, Billy and the mother.

Jamie was shocked that Billy felt they were morons. He felt betrayed. They had all shared the same high school status. Once upon a time, they were all losers. Back then Billy was just as big a moron as they were.

Howard sensed that Billy seemed insulted about something, and he didn't understand if it was something he had said or done, so he asked, "Hey man, is she your ball and chain?"

"You want me to introduce you to my ball and chain?" Billy Murdel made a fist. "This is my ball." He pointed at his bicep, "This is my chain."

"Why are you talking like that Billy? Are you dating a professional wrestler or something?" Howard asked.

Suddenly, towards the back of the mob, Jamie saw the face of his therapist. He saw her clearly, her face bobbed between the heads of others. It was an omen. His heart stopped. All of reality went mute. Words stopped making sound. He could hear nothing but the sound of his own heart beating. Then her face was gone.

Jamie craned his neck and searched the crowd for his therapist. He felt desperate. He jumped up and down, searching for her.

“What the hell is wrong with him?” Billy Murdel asked Howard.

“Dr. Veronica, I'm looking for my womb-door,” Jamie shouted. The crowd collectively gasped. “I swear to God. This is just an experiment...I'm looking for...” Jamie fell to his knees and nearly sobbed. “...MY...WOMB...DOOR. I really am.”

There was a moment of baffled silence. Then the mother dressed in black asked, “Why dis man scream for woom? You da trashbin of u ess a.” Then, she actually spat on the back of Jamie's head.

“I'm not gonna let some bitch spit on my...” Howard didn't know what hit him. Billy punched him with such force that his fist broke through the spray painted cardboard and hit Howard on his sternum and knocked him off his feet and onto his ass.

While Howard was on the ground, the mother hit him on the face with her black raven shaped purse. His nose started to bleed. Seeing blood, Jamie shrieked.

Some people in the mob, who couldn't see all the action, saw some blood flying and thought that Howard had hit the woman. “That son of a bitch dressed up like a robot hit that poor lady,” said one onlooker. Another person shouted out, “The robot's buddy was screaming about that poor ladies pussy.” Statements like this were heard by others and soon some civic minded citizens decided that they needed to defend the defenseless. Soon the whole mob was buzzing with violence.

As the crowd began to tumble on top of Jamie and

Howard, Jamie decided that he needed to get the hell out of there. He tried to push his way through the crowd, but they pushed him back. The onlookers jeered, bit, kicked, punched and spat on him as he tried to break free. Escape was impossible.

Jamie didn't give up, though. He got back on his feet, wiped the saliva from his face, lowered his shoulder and pushed his way into the crowd. But to no avail. He tried again. Still nothing. Then again. This time he was met by the same stubborn mass of the mob, but there was a strange force that seemed to push Jamie. It was like the whole mob contracted and Jamie was shot out. He got to his feet, looked around in bewilderment and ran.

Jamie hid behind Howard's car. He ducked behind it and peeked over the tail light hoping for a sign of Howard.

Twenty minutes later Howard arrived. He staggered to his car, nose bleeding, face bruised. The box had gaping holes everywhere, only a few blue knobs and red buttons remained in place. The others had been ripped off.

Jamie, still hiding behind the back of the car, whispered. "Howard, are you OK?"

Howard said nothing. He struggled painfully to remove the box. He threw it on the ground and kicked it. Then he unlocked the car. He stood there panting for a moment, and with every heave of his chest his belly button peeked out from the bottom of his shirt. *No Work, No School, No Problem!*

On the ride home, neither Jamie nor Howard had much to say. Howard stared in front him, his knuckles were white from wringing the steering wheel as he drove. He was angry that his nearly virtual friendship with Billy Murdel came to such an abrupt and violent end, and he blamed Jamie for the whole riot.

“Why the hell did you talk to Billy Murdel about his testicles?” Howard snapped the silence.

“You told me they were missing.”

“You just can't go up to a man and ask him about his testicles.”

Jamie said nothing.

“And what was all that bullshit about the womb?”

“I'm looking for my womb-door,” mumbled Jamie.

“What the fuck is a womb-door?”

Jamie didn't care to explain. He sensed that Howard really wasn't interested anyway.

As they drove back to Howard's apartment, Jamie stared out the window, not really looking at anything in particular. He was asphyxiated by what he felt, which he really didn't know how to put into words. After a while of marinating in his own numbness, he closed his eyes.

Howard mumbled, “I can't fucking believe it.”

While they drove, Jamie's thoughts led him to his high school. For some reason, he remembered a memory that had always stuck with him. When he had been a sophomore, his cross country coach had told him, “You

could be a good runner if you just put on your shoes and ran.” Maybe the coach had been right. Maybe Jamie's problem was that he just didn't try hard enough. He didn't push himself. He lacked drive and ambition. Discipline. He lacked discipline.

He sighed and began to wonder about his womb-door. Maybe it would solve all his problems. But what could he do to find it? Was it even out there? If so, how would he recognize it?

Jamie vowed, he would no longer be a Gilligan stranded on a deserted island. He would find his way home again. He would break free from his couch and his soft, boring life. He would live again. He felt suddenly relieved. Everything would be all right. He just didn't know where to begin. And if there was one thing Jamie knew, it was that beginnings were always more difficult than endings.

As they drove, and as Howard muttered to himself, the clouds in the sky parted revealing a strip of blue sky. The sun even seemed to wink at Jamie from behind a grey cloud.