In this richly-detailed portrait of pre-9/11 professional Manhattan, novelist Scott Rose brings all the energy, excitement and shimmering ambiguity of the great metropolis vividly to life. If you've ever disliked your job, you are sure to love this book.

# Mr. David Cooper's Happy Suicide

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# Chapter 1

**F** ar downtown, the mighty phallic twins of the World Trade Center yet stood. January 4th, 1988; 7:50 a.m. Mr. David Cooper's clock radio jerked him awake with up-to-the-minute reports pertaining to a merciless snow-sleet-and-rainstorm then buffeting the Eastern Seaboard. The news continued. On Wall Street --yak yak yak, blah blah blah. In the Middle East, for a change, more yak yak yak, more blah blah. David silenced the clock radio.

Lest he receive a tongue lashing from his wife Liz, who, pillow clapped around her head, was still trying to avoid wakefulness, he shuffled quietly into the bathroom where, dispiritedly, he peed. Into the shower; hot water pulsed from the Picopay massage. David wearily hoped he would be able to summon some smidgen of enthusiasm for his day copywriting at the Betts, Gibber & Fibber Advertising Agency. Dread, though, a boa constricting a white mouse, coiled his heart as he anticipated that excruciating version of reality sure to assault him one hour hence.

Phones ceaselessly ringing, ringing, ringing. Demanding clients, irascible superiors, resentful secretaries; the mountainous, soul-eroding distress that accompanies the mass marketing of sandwich cookies, lawn mowers, batteries, laxatives and panty hose. Across his back, he rubbed a loofah sponge. The activity caused him a very minor physical pleasure as his inner self continued agonizing over the prospect of going to its vigorously detested Betts, Gibber & Fibber office prison. Carrying through on a New Year's resolution to keep clean feet, David scrubbed between his toes with a washcloth, his thoughts centered on a mélange of workweek anxieties and family frictions.

His wife Liz thrived, bitching at and about him. Usually, he recognized truth in his beloved termagant's laments. She often complained that they too rarely went out on the town. "When's the last time we took in a smash Broadway show? And why don't we ever eat in trendy, celebrity-filled restaurants? Lincoln Center is only ten blocks away, but for all the star-studded galas we've ever attended, you'd

think we lived in Koshkonong. This is Man*hat*tan. We should be living a God-damned Manhattan life!"

The time David might have spent enjoying pricey entertainments, he generally passed slogging for the money that would be necessary to attend them, while on his precious few free evenings, harried to enfeeblement, he was incapable of receptivity towards the sybaritic delights of New York's costly diversions.

And though David understood that his wife harangued him in hopes of refreshing their marriage, her incriminating grievances, among myriad other irritants, had transmogrified his days, weeks, months and years into a never-ending, why-did-it-ever-begin vomit of time. There were moments when David pictured Liz's tongue glued to her back molars, her bicuspids wired together and her lips double-X'd by surgical tape. The image caused him guilt, guilt, guilt working with the slow corrosive effect of Coca-Cola dripping on a penny. After all, if only he could reorganize his life around leisure, he would truly enjoy Liz, the person, and constantly demonstrate his adoration of her. But the status quo had the Mrs. persistently amplifying her husband's miseries, occasioning him this bewilderment: he deeply resented and loathed the woman he loved.

\* \* \*

Mr. David Cooper at forty-three felt despair over what aging is in the face of death. Frequently exacerbating this despair was the presence in David's apartment of Debby, his twenty-year-old daughter, who was trying to hit paydirt as a model. With her I'm-young-and-I'm-cool-and-I'll-be-that-way-forever chatter about the latest in American popular culture, she left David feeling like an ancient relic of human matter.

Once, when Debby learned her father thought the singer Tiffany was a lamp, she inquired whether he'd yet accepted the permanent break-up of the Beatles, labeled him "uncoooooool, to the max!" and then asked his opinion of Johnny Depp, a star of 21 Jump Street, whom he but vaguely remembered from some cheesy product endorsement.

\* \* \*

#### MR. DAVID COOPER'S HAPPY SUICIDE

As David began Calvin Klein-soaping his underarms, his thoughts turned to the aspirations of Larry, his only son. Newly graduated from college, Larry yearned to break into literature. Because David wanted his progeny to wind up more contented, more fulfilled in life than he, he tolerated Larry's living at home, even buying the computer disks Larry needed to pursue happiness by authoring a Great American Novel that would, against the flabbergasting, demoralizing odds, become an instant nationwide bestseller.

But Larry's presence was problematic.

The young man made his father feel like the most cretinous of Philistines by talking with glib erudition about Melville's lesser-known works, every word Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe had ever put on paper, as well as about the structure and semiotics of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Semiotics? David was too busy to read *Bonfire*, but because Larry's verbalizations had a place in the downpour of varied mental stimulants that left David feeling as though deluged unto his nostrils in gunk, he did have an inkling of what transpired in Wolfe's opus. Something about a coy fellow named McSherman, tangled in fictional fiascos at a courthouse in the Bronx. Why *he* should have any interest in fictional fiascos, David didn't know, nor could he contemplate the question for long, as he had to ponder the latest in real-life market research related to his work; reams of paper filled with charts, columns and graphs inconclusively detailing who was buying sandwich cookies, lawn mowers, batteries, laxatives and panty hose.

David's shower ended. The Picopay massage had done nothing to alleviate his mental sufferings, in fact, thoughts swarmed his brain like three football teams tackling Stephen Hawkings; thoughts about the wife who made him feel unromantic, the son who made him feel unintelligent, the daughter who made him feel un*coooool*, the Betts, Gibber, & Fibber associates who made him feel overworked, underpaid, unappreciated.

He felt as though he had been dropped in quicksand, left to endlessly struggle, struggle, struggle, denied, for no reason, the comparative dignity of simply sinking and drowning.

Watching the last of his shower water swirl away, David imagined himself, kisser down in the bathtub, dead. The vision was one of unfathomable relief. Why, America's consumers could just decide which brand of laxative to buy without him!

But the life force compelled David to turn away from the Sirens of everlasting rest. Buffing steam from a mirror, he considered his face, a handsome visage that maintained traces of seductive youthful fullness. It seemed to express lots of buoyant self-confidence and much can-do good cheer. Yes siree, Bob! Mr. David Cooper was in full possession of the nearly imperturbable false front requisite to survival in the image-obsessed realm of advertising.

He admired his countenance a few meditative moments. How could so vital appearing a human feel this depleted? Surely he was being just absolutely preposterous to consider death attractive. A man of many strengths, he knew how to budge business forward. Beaming into the mirror, David decided his problems were challenges that he would surmount with gusto.

But wait.

His brain recognized this Pollyanna-istic, 'problems are really challenges' bunk. Why had he not yet conceived a plan for escaping enslavement to the grind at Betts, Gibber & Fibber Advertising? He considered his financial situation and with tentative elation realized he had enough money to quit his job, live nicely for six months and then – and then what? A flying leap off the Throg's Neck Bridge at the end of June?

Six unstressful, unhideous months. The idea certainly appealed. David might not have money for all the social functions and cultural events Liz dreamed of attending, but he *would* be able to devote himself to his wife, cooking meals, listening with engagement to whatever she should say, tenderly kissing her during long, languorous afternoons. And unpressured, he could make time for himself ... alone ... sitting by one of those elegant waterfalls tucked between midtown Manhattan skyscrapers, thinking of nothing, blissful, untroubled nothing ... nothing ... nothing.

On and on the scheme played in David's mind. Six calm, relaxing months. Six tranquil, satisfying months. This was the best David dared to expect from going on! Maybe he could not have a satisfactory life, yet he could, in the company of his wife, ease towards a satisfactory death.

Did he care what might become of Liz afterwards? Did he really care? As long as he was ruminating the topic, he reasoned Liz could either sell their expensive Manhattan apartment and then move to Centerville, or -- or what? Somehow, she would fend. David's smile was genuine as, tweezing a nose hair, he mouthed two little words he planned later to direct at Mr. Betts, his boss. "I quit."

Emerging from the steamy sanctum of his bathroom, David found Liz awake and already dressed in a black taffeta bustier, wrapped, ruched and delicately budded. The woman had been using American Express at Saks Fifth Avenue to costume herself for fundraisers she would never attend and glamorous late night museum parties to which she would never be invited. Ridiculous, perhaps, yet devotion to several Jane Fonda workout tapes had left her looking sexy. A wrapped, ruched, delicately budded black taffeta bustier actually suited her figure to perfection.

"David? Are you forgetting your promise?"

"Huhn?" David inquired, totally self-absorbed in the well-being that came from the determination to quit his job.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten your promise to eat mothball and dog shit stew for breakfast."

"Whatever you wanna make is fine, dear."

He hastened into his trousers. Liz seized the knot in his tie. "You *promised* we'd see Balanchine's *The Nutcracker* together. The run is over. You didn't take me." She narrowed a slow, hostile glance at her fingernails.

"I've been so busy, hon, and I'm sorry, bu--"

"Sorry? I'll say you're a sorry excuse! When's the last time we got ta ..."

David cupped his hands around Liz's shoulders, just where the bustier left off. "Listen Liz. Listen."

Grinning enigmatically, eerily, he fixed her eyes with his own. The little puffy and darkling bags under his peepers caused her a flicker of existential revulsion. "Things'll improve, starting pronto. From tonight

on, we're gonna have more fun. I can't explain now, but you'll see, I swear."

Liz believed this the way she believed George Washington had gnawed down the cherry tree with his wooden teeth. David rushed into his raincoat, snatched an umbrella from the front closet and then left for Betts, Gibber & Fibber Advertising.

Gusty winds full of soaking sleet greeted him outside his West 76th Street brownstone. He walked towards Columbus Avenue, hoping to hail a yellow cab. Surprise! None were to be had. He waited and waited and waited for a bus. When one came, each of the people overcrowding it was equipped with a dripping umbrella. Gruffly, the driver commanded passengers rearwards, an order many tried obeying, though the rear was already over-packed with weary, miserable humans. Feisty old women, twice as aggressive as they were ugly, pushed, poked and shoved Mr. David Cooper. Several dozen dripping umbrellas trickled water down his pants legs, over his cuffs, into his socks.

What a quickening David sensed while speculating how he would live, live, *live* to a gilded hilt the six months before his happy death, never once riding public transportation! The bus crept and stalled from stop to stop. Cursing humans with dripping umbrellas squeezed past each other aboard the overcrowded vehicle as David lapsed into a drear contemplation of an advertising placard offering social services to unwed teen-aged mothers.

\* \* \*

Inside the vaulted, marble entryway of the skyscraper housing Betts, Gibber & Fibber, David met with a thick-necked guard's stony glare. David's elevator made eight stops between the lobby and the 47th floor, far fewer than usual. And there it was, (phooey!), with splendid Hollywood-worthy Manhattan views, the reception area of offices where David had endured stress and paperwork drudgery and paperwork drudgery and stress. Thinking he would soon leave this midair hell forever made David feel all the more cosmically victimized that he should ever have been trapped in it. Characteristically, the receptionist was tele-chatting with a friend while transferring business calls to incorrect extensions. Meanwhile, a messenger, wired on cocaine, smelling of rankest B.O. and cussing as though the expanding universe existed solely to make his life burdensome and hopeless, dumped a soaking leather sack atop a silkupholstered sofa in the waiting area. A cluster of three clients, goodwill ambassadors from an eye shadow company, flashed blatantly phony smiles at the receptionist, who continued gabbing on the phone.

David wended past these insipid goings-on and reached his office where his secretary Luanda Jones was snooping through the contents of an envelope marked 'Personal and Confidential.' Had he not left that envelope inside his upper right desk drawer? Sheepishly, Luanda pretended to be organizing mail, a joke. Since when did she organize Mr. David Cooper's effects? This incompetent Luanda had been transferred to him from a higher-up. Daily, he decided against firing her, because the chances of getting stuck with somebody worse were so strong.

Brrrrrring! The receptionist had erroneously switched a caller to David's extension. The phone rang again, bringing into David's ear the voice of a magazine subscription service's zealous rep, telling him he had been selected as the lucky winner of et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. After barking his disinterest at the zealot, David dropped the receiver into its cradle, sent Luanda to her cubicle, hung his coat, racked his umbrella and then readied himself to tell Mr. Betts he was resigning.

Behold! A phone memo, from Betts himself. He wanted to see Cooper first thing. David dared hope Mr. Betts was axing him, because if fired, he could collect unemployment compensation, and, until his satisfactory death, live high off the hog, breakfasting on finest imported prosciutto.

But what motive would they have for firing him? Diligence and industry? A flawless attendance record? Perdurable willingness to meet the clients' every demand? Futile, this hope of getting fired. He was a company man. A bitterly aggravated, smiling company man.

\* \* \*

David found George Betts pacing the circumference of his office, pridefully straightening award plaques engraved with self-promoting thanks from dozens of gadget and gewgaw manufacturers.

"Cooper!" he declared, seating himself energetically, motioning for David to sit on the oversized Chesterfield hassock in front of his oversized Chippendale desk. "Happy New Year, Cooper! Happy New Year."

"Auld lang syne," chanted David, abashedly wondering where the conversation could possibly be headed, worried there would be no short, sweet way of telling Mr. Betts he was resigning.

"David, I called you up here for a reason."

"I wanted to see you first thing, myself, George. I've been thinking, and .... "

"Cooper," interrupted Mr. Betts, "as you know, Betts, Gibber and Fibber has just completed an extraordinarily successful year. And I mean to make us an even *greater* success in eighty-eight."

George Betts *was* speaking with verve; there could be no doubt the man felt himself to be on top of the world, though he was only on the 47th floor of a skyscraper. Mr. Betts was also 60, so David, worn ragged at a mere 43, was incredulous that his boss could carry on with the whole farce as though it were not one. Well, people are limitlessly diverse, no telling what might be in their heads and why at any particular time.

"David, I've been watching you ... and I like what I see."

David suffered a desolate foreboding. He had vowed to quit, he was going to quit, and all he needed to steel his resolve was one split second's memory of the mind-addling, nerve-fraying, soul-oppressing chaos and grind of this advertising company.

"Mr. Betts, I quit."

David, though planning to kill himself six months hence, felt like he had just been liberated from death row. For his part, Mr. Betts registered shock.

"David. You can't quit, not now, I have plans for you, big plans and ... Cooper, why would you want to *quit*?"

The question had been voiced in a sanctimonious hush.

"George, I'm burned out. I, I just can't take any more. The long hours here, the take-home projects. I've been working four, sometimes five accounts at once. My wife complains all the time, and ..."

"David, David," scoffed Mr. Betts, "is *this* your lucky day! Ha ha! I asked to see you because I'm putting you on a single account and doubling your salary. I've hooked a special, very lucrative client, and Mr. David Cooper, Executive Vice President is just the copywriter to treat this customer with the apposite, level-headed business sense. Should be fun besides. Interesting focus groups, creative brainstorming, honestly, the administrative side of this one, for you, will be minimal."

David stared out the window at a large, rectangular, nerd-filled conference room in a neighboring skyscraper.

"Are you with me?" inquired Mr. Betts, while David, not having remotely foreseen this permutation of destiny, felt confusion hinder his ability to act, as though it were cement filling a washing machine, or a sigmoidoscope probing his entrails for polyps.

"Think of it David. Double your salary. A cushier office. An executive secretary. Every evening off. 9 to 5 only. The Mrs. can't mind that. And with extra money, you'll be able to take her places, buy her things, show her a good time. Just think."

"I am thinking. What is this single account?"

"FMP, Cooper, FMP. It's going to mean big bucks for Betts, Gibber and Fibber. F! M! P! Makers of fine condoms. Cooper, as you know, the top has blown off the condom market lately. Between all the diseases people can catch, and all the diseases people can catch, well, there are two kings' ransoms getting spent on good old rubbers these days. Of course, tisn't the good old rubbers folks are buying. Today's consumers favor ultra-thin condoms from Japan, or the ones loaded with Nonoxynol-9, or glow-in-the-dark prophylactics, and so on. Trouble is, condom ad campaigns have mostly been menacing, using scare tactics. The financier behind FMP ..."

"Excuse me, George. Exactly what does FMP mean?"

"FMP," said Mr. Betts, clearing his throat, tapping his palms atop his Chippendale desk, "stands for Fuck Me Please."

#### \* \* \*

Mr. David Cooper in the end agreed to remain in Betts, Gibber & Fibber's employ. Given the rest of the day off, he took it with a sense of having been reborn, reborn into a world very slightly better than the one he had heretofore known. And after he explained the FMP deal to his wife, she voluptuously used her lips to unfurl a sample Fuck Me Please rubber over the stiffest, most frenzied erection David had achieved in years.

# Chapter 2

arry Cooper sat at a quiet Upper West Side bar early in the evening on January 9th, sipping sparingly from a flute of Veuve Clicquot champagne. He recalled having heard a Veuve Clicquot radio advertisement in which a woman of supremely cultured, disdainfully arrogant voice lectured on Veuve Clicquot's magisterial history.

He fancied himself a link in a continuum of refined civility that, through his irrefutably individualistic work, would pass onwards to future generations. Closing his eyes, he visualized an inspired member of some future generation visiting quiet Upper West Side bars, trying to settle the hotly-contested scholarly debate over which bar Larry Cooper had patronized the night of January 9, 1988.

He opened his eyes and then held his crystal flute up towards amber-hued light emanating from an Art Deco sconce upon a rosewood wall. Watching the trajectory of the bubbles through the champagne surrounding them, Larry thought he had at last discovered the purest possible form of speculative philosophy. The origin of the bubbles, their relation to each other as they wriggled upwards, what became of them when they reached the surface; the spectacle held his attention, mesmerically, until a sizzling hot young lady occupied a leather-padded Memphis bar stool beside his. Larry wondered if the young lady's face, too beautiful for words, had been crafted into its state of ineffable loveliness by a talented plastic surgeon. He pretended to still be halfabsorbed in his reverie over the Veuve Clicquot's effervescence when he began conversing.

"I bet you wonder what I do," he contended in the direction of the fluted glass.

The young lady looked at an opposite wall, sophisticated ennui in her eyes.

"No, I see what you do. You stare into champagne flutes for inspiration to start writing."

Larry was mildly agog.

"Auspicious."

"So I was correct, you're an aspiring writer?"

"Yes. How could you tell that just from looking at me?"

"A woman has her ways."

The bartender came and took the young lady's order for Perrier with a twist of lime. As the libation arrived, Larry was saying:

"I'm planning to write a ..."

"Gimme three guesses," interjected the young lady, partaking of the Perrier, whose blandness reminded her that if wine weren't fattening, her life would be more enjoyable.

"You're planning to write an instant nationwide, best-selling Great American Novel."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Larry, with rather sophomoric ebullience. "An instant nationwide, best-selling Great American Novel. How'd'ja know?"

"I've been around. Now, let's exchange names. Mine's Jill Feinbaum, and if you wanna pretend we're in some earlier century, you may kiss my hand."

With mock gallantry, Larry touched his lips to Jill's delicately poised fingers. He correctly sensed that the young lady, affecting a stiff-backboned, Puritan primness, had been sexually aroused.

"The name's Cooper. Larry Cooper."

"Look, Mister Cooper. I'm a jaded young New Yorker who knows more than enough, so let's just ignore our reciprocal magnetism and immediately chew over the big question."

Larry contemplated the bubbles in his Veuve Clicquot.

"Which big question?"

"The meaning of life," sneered Jill, sipping her Perrier.

"Easy."

"Oh?"

"Life has a meaning that nobody who lives will ever divine." "In which case, life might as well be meaningless."

"Mars the share and flame"

"May the champagne flow."

"Bottoms up. To the enchanting absurdity called life!"

"Cheers! Now, pray tell. How could you tell I want to write an instant nationwide, best-selling Great American Novel, simply by looking at me?"

"I'm an assistant at the MacGregor, DiGiovanni and Finkelstein Literary Agency. After my first few hours on the job, spotting young writers desperate to produce an instant nationwide, best-selling Great American Novel became a snap."

Larry, realizing that Jill was among those hard to find, harder to seduce individuals with honest to goodness publishing connections, nearly shit his pants out of anxiety over what the future would hold for him if he failed to make it as a professional author. Nevertheless, he summoned the composure to say: "I wanna break into literature ... in a big way."

"Maybe I can help you." Jill licked and then trailed a fingertip across Larry's chest.

"Still ignoring the sexual magnetism between us?"

"Perhaps," said Jill, suggestively smiling, winking. "But strain credulity for a moment. Suppose I'm interested in your book. What's it about?"

"Well," answered Larry, gazing with a young man's undespairing perplexity at the bubbles in his Veuve Clicquot, "I haven't actually written anything yet."

"Christ on a crutch! You'd better get your act together in a goddamned hurry! Don't you realize? There are tens upon thousands of writers all over this country with ambitions identical to yours. Identical! But they've already completed manuscripts that are being rejected left and right, so really, you have quite a bit of catching up to do."

As the evening progressed, Larry got a daunting earful about the dealings of big business publishers and their resistless rush towards whoppingly gainful corporate conglomerations.

\* \* \*

David Cooper was to begin his FMP account work in earnest on Monday, January 11. Arriving at Betts, Gibber, & Fibber punctually at

9:00 A.M., he saw Pamela Potts, a high-strung nervous wreck of an account executive. Having dropped her briefcase in the lobby, she was gathering her materials.

David helped Pamela collect her papers.

"Thank you," she muttered.

"Having a hectic one?" asked David, aware that his effort to sound as though he really cared had been unsuccessful.

"I'm on my way to a pissing match with some clients!" "Drink a 6-pack."

#### \* \* \*

George Betts had kept his promises to David Cooper. The new office where David was to work miracles for Fuck Me Please condoms came complete with Hollywood-worthy Manhattan views, space age recessed lighting, micro-mini Venetian blinds, elegant Scandinavian furniture, light gray ultrasuede carpeting and two robust, spreading ficus trees that would flourish despite the care they never received, as their leaves were made of finest Indian silk. Beside one of the ficus trees was David Cooper's private fax machine. A communications console at the center of David's desk would in theory give David instant access to everything he needed from the fathomlessly banal 'information explosion' taking place in the world. Atop the desk was an electric pencil sharpener, an electric stapler and a streamlined, brasstrimmed digital clock-calendar.

From the wet bar built into his office wall, David would be able to offer visitors chilled Evian water, Diet Coke or 1982 Clos du Val Reserve. In preparation for those visitors, he could arrange his hair and camouflage the bags under his eyes by the lights of vanity mirrors Mr. Betts had had installed inside the wet bar's doors.

\* \* \*

Mr. Betts had also seen to it that David Cooper's new assistant, Marianne Martins, was a seasoned professional. She boasted twenty years administrative experience, during which she'd aimed for and achieved automaton perfection, never making typos, never misfiling documents, never confusing dates and times in her boss's schedule. In short, a model Executive Secretary, powdered, well-groomed and stiffbreastedly proud that her survival scheme, however humdrum, was working.

\* \* \*

But even the chicest office, staffed by the world's best secretary, is a stage set for irritation, and David Cooper's first day 'exclusively' dedicated to the FMP account was fraught with unprofitable distractions. As David and Marianne were arranging their Fuck Me Please filing system, a caller informed David of the necessity for settling matters related to his former pantyhose account. David attempted a defense.

"I'm supposed to be working exclusively on FMP."

"Yer devotedness is friggin' heartwarmin', but if ya don't help us sort out this mess, Betts, Gibber an' Fibber might fold, or become tha object of uh hostile takeover, or who knows what, an' then ya won't be able ta do uh fuckin' thing fer FMP."

Ten minutes after David started smoothing out the pantyhose mess, there came another distracting call.

"Yeah, Dave, we've got a new writer for the sandwich cookie account. He *must* be briefed on this business, pronto. You're the only one qualified to help."

"But I'm already sidetracked into pantyhose, even though Mr. Betts wants me working on FMP, and ..."

The response came as a caustic jeer.

"Mr Betts's orders are for *you* to help us, *now*! What's your beef, anyway? The whole office knows your salary was just doubled."

And so it went. By 5:00 Monday, David had done next to nothing for FMP.

\* \* \*

A very harried David Cooper faced additional aggravations after leaving his office at precisely 5:00. Hundreds of yellow cabs jamming the streets and avenues were all either occupied or off duty. The evening air, colder than a witch's tit in a brass bra and moved by a constant wind, made David's teeth chatter, his facial skin purple and his balls retract. He waited 20 minutes at curbside for a bus that never came. Then, he began walking home, hoping to hail a cab along the way. Twice he saw open taxis, impossible for him to catch, since they were on the opposite side of a heavily trafficked avenue. And the one time an open cab travelled his side of the road, an elderly woman rendered athletic by the arresting cold beat him to it. David didn't even see the tropical-flowers-filled storefront before which a pebble, having flipped inside his shoe, forced him to expose his lightly perspiring foot to Arctic air in midtown Manhattan.

When he finally arrived in his apartment's warm foyer, he stared into the void, which showed him nothing that might render his future existence more bearable. Collapsing onto his leather Roche Bobois living room couch, he closed his eyes and was promptly aggressed by memories of the day. Though his life experience had taught him that workdays were irremediably grueling, his mind fruitlessly groped at methods for improving them. Opening his eyes, he saw his daughter Debby, Walkman headphones hugging her ears. She was practicing movement.

Debby first walked, with upper crust adolescent demureness, feet prissily gliding, shoulders sloping downwards, arms covering breasts to suggest impregnable reluctance towards sex. Then, hands press-wiping her shimmying loins and ass, she undulated with the ravish-me-before-I-ravish-you abandon of a belly dancer.

Mr. David Cooper watched admiringly as Debby affected a sphinxlike gaze, and, right arm akimbo, began walking with a soupcon of ultra-refined slinkiness, truly looking like an haute couture runway star promenading clothes for clothes' sake. Sudden paternal disquiet furled Mr. David Cooper's brow. What if his daughter, whom he instinctually wanted to protect against life's every harshness, failed to become a dazzling, successful model? What would she do?

#### MR. DAVID COOPER'S HAPPY SUICIDE

And what if some cunning entity baited Debby into a loveless act of intercourse by promising to open a series of gilded doors for her without having the key to so much as the first of them? The imagined sexploitation caused David's emotions to froth and then David felt irked that a mere speculation had thusly overshadowed the living moment. David's love for Debby next hoodwinked him into believing he might scheme up some advice that would guide his daughter from an active and happy present into a happy and active future. Complicating matters, his brain reminded him that he must, at all costs, the very next day, make appreciable progress with his Fuck Me Please account work. And for good measure, his cerebral faculties occasioned him blank bewilderment, by randomly recalling that human extinction through either nuclear holocaust or meteorite impact remained possible. The thought of this world being instantaneously vaporized lingered peculiarly in his subconscious.

Leaning across the back of the couch, Debby pecked a kiss onto her father's left cheek.

"Hi, Daddy."

Daddy heard a twangy rhythmic buzz emanating from Debby's Walkman headphones.

"Whatcha listenin' to?" he asked his daughter, who, not listening to him, was again practice-walking, now in imitation of Dolly Parton. Rising, David removed Debby-Dolly's headphones.

"I asked what you're listening to."

"Randy Travis's Honky Tonk Moon."

"Who is Randy Travis?"

"Who is Randy Travis?" mocked Debby, distorting her facial features as a semiological projection of belittling disbelief, "he's only, like, one uh the hottest singers goin', dad!"

"Then why haven't I heard of him?"

"Good question." The good question was never to be answered. Liz Cooper entered the room.

"Sweetheart, you're home. They really *are* letting you leave at five sharp."

"Yes."

"Great, let's go to a movie at once. We'll eat afterwards"

"Wait a sec. Aren't you gonna ask how my day went?"

"How'd your day go?"

"Don't ask."

Liz suffered one of those onerous sensations so often sensed in human-to-human relationships.

"I thought we'd see Woody Allen's new movie September. Allons-y!"

Liz and David walked to the Loews 84th Street Six theater complex on Broadway, where they joined a long, snaking line of movie-hungry New Yorkers waiting outdoors in severe January cold to buy tickets for one of six films. Inside the theater lobby there was warmth and lots of life; life cheering around video games, life selling pre-buttered popcorn and watery sodas, life stopping for a kiss in a crowded corner, life talking about the dream lives lived in films.

Heading towards Cinema 3, David's foot stuck to a wet green Chuckles. Though David saw nothing funny about his foot being cleaved to the floor in this fashion, Liz did, so laughed, teasingly, while tugging his elbow to pry him off the offending goo.

Woody Allen's *September* began. The entire audience had been hoping for some smidgen of comic relief from reality, but was instead witness to a depressing film full of deeply depressed characters. Mr. David Cooper got tired so fell asleep and Liz got tired of the movie so woke David in order that they could leave before it ended.

"Gee," remarked David, out on the sidewalk, where a line of shivering Homo sapiens was waiting to see a film called *Batteries Not Included*, "too bad the beginning of our new freedom and romance in the big city had to start like this."

"I'm not worried. FMP will lead us to bigger, better things and ... listen, I still feel adventuresome. Not that I need to climb Everest, or anything, but eating in a Tibetan restaurant would be kinda fun, doncha think?"

"Sure," responded David, hailing a cab, opening its door for Liz and then getting in himself.

"To The Tibetan Kitchen, at ... "

"Third between Thirtieth and Thirty-First," asserted the taxi driver with a gold-toothed grin, "place is like a second home for me. I'm *from* Tibet."

"You are?"

"Born in the shadow of Chomolungma."

"The shadow of what?"

"Chomolungma, lady. Ever hear of it?"

And having acerbically inveighed against the Chinese government, the cabbie dropped Liz and David at The Tibetan Kitchen. The Coopers ordered *tsel gyathuk ngopa*, which anybody who knows Tibetan cuisine can tell you is sautéed noodles with vegetables. They also had a serving of Himalayan *khatsa*, spicy cauliflower with bean curd.

"Best Himalayan khatsa I've ever tasted."

"But David, it's the only Himalayan khatsa you've ever tasted."

"How do *you* know? Maybe I snuck off some time and without ever reporting the fact to you, ate a different Himalayan *khatsa*."

"Mother always warned me about men eating Himalayan *khatsa* behind my back," revealed Liz, taking a forkful of *tsel gyathuk ngopa*. "Isn't it too bad Woody Allen doesn't make more of his humorous movies?"

"Yes."

"Why do you suppose he doesn't?"

"Maybe he doesn't see anything funny left in the world."

"Go on! Chickens are still crossing the road for a variety of reasons, and ... "

"And what?"

"Well, I don't know," admitted Liz, frustration in her voice, "but I'm not a comic genius, and Woody Allen is. Shouldn't a comic genius be able to find something *funny* in the world?"

Together, the Coopers failed at working up a few jokes while finishing off their Tibetan meal and then they finished off that meal with *bocha*, a buttered and salted tea. Subsequently, they endured the misfortune of being driven home by a chatterbox cab driver native to Mali who, in an unintelligible, violently accented English, railed against a deaf universe about the woes of taxi driving.

# Chapter 3

r. David Cooper's FMP work actually moved ahead well for a few nerve-obliteratingly stressful days. David gained knowledge of the condom market's complex demographics and convinced Mr. Betts he was shrewdly scheming to earn big bucks for the firm. Liz Cooper, meanwhile, sniffed a chance to get something she wanted by testing Mr. Betts's commitment to David as a prized producer. So when David awoke the morning of Sunday, January 17, what he saw was Liz, dressed in a white silk, lace-trimmed negligee, proffering him a breakfast in bed.

Served on a silver tray strewn with dahlia petals, it was a continental repast of buttery croissants, glistening seed-speckled fruit jam, fresh berries with beaded water catching morning sunlight and Earl Grey tea in an Art Deco porcelain kettle.

David looked at the breakfast through sleep-blurred eyes and clearly saw that Liz was after something specific, but pretended to be a pasha, pampered as just reward for the mere fact of existing. Exposing his uvula during a long, indulgent yawn and then settling into a blank expression, David wondered why he couldn't have lived his life through to this point wholly free of anxiety.

"What's the occasion?"

"I ... I just felt like serving breakfast in bed to my FMP star," lied Liz.

"Hnunmm," he responded.

"Don't you notice anything special?"

"Besides this breakfast in bed?" He scratched his chin, feigning infinite puzzlement, and then in a burst of counterfeit enlightenment exclaimed: "Oh! You want me to comment on your negligee! It's Victorian but sexy and ..."

And before David could finish what he was saying, his wife wellnigh knocked over the kettle of Earl Grey tea while tenderly probing his strawberry jam-filled mouth with her tongue. Easing off from the kiss, feathering the length of David's tumid member, Liz felt confident of getting what she wanted.

"Sweetheart, you've heard that *The Phantom of the Opera* is opening in previews at the Majestic, haven't you?"

David's low-to-high swooping "Yeeee—es" was inflected with lightweight Weltschmerz.

"I'd *love* to see it along with other V.I.P.s. Could Mr. Betts somehow get us tickets?"

Who can say what percentage of an adman's life consists of trite quandaries? Getting tickets from Mr. Betts would certainly mean owing the man some tedious favor ... work ... work beyond FMP duties ... but were David not to ask Mr. Betts for *Phantom* tickets, his inaction would serve as tacit admission to his ego and his wife that he was something less than a VIP. David looked at Liz. She was half-dressed in a white silk, lace-trimmed negligee, had just served him breakfast in bed and was softly caressing his scrotum. He determined to politic for *Phantom* tickets.

\* \* \*

Tuesday afternoon, while handing *Phantom* passes to David, Mr. Betts mentioned that one of the firm's laxative accounts needed help from an old hand. And on account of the help David gave, he left work late Wednesday evening, arriving home, tired, in time to rush out with Liz for the *Phantom* preview. *Phantom*'s success with international society made David feel punily unaccomplished, because expensive *Phantom* tickets were sold out a year in advance and magazines, newspapers and television personalities all gushed on and on and on about *Phantom*. There were *Phantom* souvenirs in every gift shop and *Phantom* ads plastered on every other city bus.

Lo! the show itself bored David even more than his Betts, Gibber & Fibber office work.

Though *Phantom* was supposed to be a recreation of Parisian grand opera, it proved a ragamuffin cousin to productions he'd seen in his day at New York's Metropolitan. He deemed the music obnoxiously repetitive, the story an uninvolving, senseless shambling. David did

come away from the vapidity with an interesting impression left in his mind by the Phantom's hands -- they sculpted air, they posed and pointed with spooky elegance, they communicated giddy moral ambiguity -- but it would take more than a memory of hands in refined motion to sustain David through his tiresome quest for Fuck Me Please success.

Liz claimed to love *Phantom* from curtain time. During an intermission, she learned that the star, Michael Crawford, having suffered a hiatal hernia while performing in London, now played his role heavily doped and in unending pain. This information made Liz love the performance more, but caused David some nasty reflections on life's essential horror.

The essential horror of life didn't concern David the following morning, though, when Liz again brought him breakfast in bed, this time as reward for having gotten her tickets to a VIP preview.

\* \* \*

Reaching home after work Thursday, David found his daughter Debby and her friend Mindy improving their portfolios. Appraising the young ladies, it wasn't hard for David to conclude that they were each as stunning as many a model he had seen in sleek, enviably well-paid, globally-distributed advertisements. Mindy's facial bone structure made a seductive display of her fresh, peaches and cream complexion. She had supple lips under a small, perfect nose and her beautifully formed, alert eyes served as gateways through which her gregarious disposition entered the world. Mindy, furthermore, had a drop-dead sexy body.

Debby, for her part, looked anywhere between 15 and 25. This delighted modeling agents as much as it unnerved horny men on-themake who happen to have scruples about plugging minors. When Debby's ruby lips spread into a smile, what one saw was a flawless mouthful of teeth, bright white American teeth. Like Mindy, she had a small, perfect nose. Her sapphire eyes, deep-set in smooth young flesh, were surmounted by gracefully arched eyebrows that seemed more of gossamer than hair, while the long, thick, tumbling mane atop her head was alive with highlights and body. And her body! Ah, Miss Debby Cooper possessed a body both ravishing and lithesome, so lithesome indeed that had the word not existed, they would have coined it because of her.

"Like, it's hard," remarked Debby, "decidin' how to put your portfolio together, ya know?"

"Actually, it's easy," responded Mindy. "All ya do is assemble your glossies in a dazzling collection that compels the guys who write checks to say 'Book. *This*. Model.""

"That's all?" asked Debby, her voice purest sugar admixed with acid. "Here I thought this was gonna be tough."

On the table before the two were textured matt prints, empty acetates, colored slides, binders, and other modeling portfolio paraphernalia.

"Know what the worst part is?"

"Fear of rejection?"

"Besides fear of rejection. It's like, not only don't ya know who's gonna see your portfolio, even the person ya don't know can't say exactly what they're lookin' for."

Debby chirruped a sigh while contemplating her portfolio.

"It's like, I'd rather be a high-fashion model than a catalogue bitch, but bein' a catalogue bitch is obviously better than bein' a waitress who gets her ass run inta tha ground without gettin' paid enough for the toilet paper she'll need to keep her exhausted butt clean."

David, unseen, grimaced.

"So, how d'ya know precisely when you're makin' the best possible move by becomin' a catalogue bitch?"

"Ya don't. Ya throw yourself at the mercy of fate and then hope that fate has mercy."

The comment reminded David that many people half his age have all the skepticism vis-à-vis existence that two grueling decades of salary slavehood had given him. Said he: "They don't call 'dumb luck' 'dumb luck' for nothing. The number of times I've kicked myself for not having invented the Pet Rock."

"I know, daddy, I know, I've heard you say it in despair so often; "Why didn't I invent the Pet Rock?"

Silence. David wanted to see if perhaps he could help Debby and Mindy, but especially Debby, select their best photographs. He hovered, waiting to see what would happen next. Next, Debby and Mindy were beset by self-consciousness.

"Why are you hangin' around, daddy?" whined Debby. "Do you think you're Vinnie Terranova investigatin' a case?"

"Huhn? I don't know Vinnie Terranova from a hole in the ozone."

"Like, you're kiddin' me, right, Mr. Cooper?"

"Like, wrong, I'm not kiddin' you," retorted David, sensitive about dropping into the generation gap.

"Daaaaddy," scoffed Debby, with a timbre one would use when explaining to an imbecile for the umpteenth time that water is two parts hydrogen, one part water, "Vinnie Terranova is an undercover cop on the TV show *Wiseguy*. He's played by Ken Wahl, and everybody knows Ken Wahl -- *don't* they?"

Debby's "they" had plainly meant one lone Homo sapiens named David Cooper, who didn't know Ken Wahl any better than he knew Johnny Depp or Randy Travis. David left his living room resigned to the notion that time, racing forwards, would slime him under the perpetual ejaculation of youth culture spurting from sea to shining sea in The United States of America.

\* \* \*

While egressing from the living room, Mr. David Cooper crossed paths with Larry, who was on his way out to meet Jill Feinbaum for a stroll along Columbus Avenue. David recalled that the last prolonged conversation he conducted with his son had ended in cultural embarrassment; he'd been forced to admit never having read beyond *Moby Dick*'s first page.

"Hello, Ishmael."

"Don't call me Ishmael!" snarled Larry, donning his ski parka, saluting David before going out the door. Though the air was quite

frosty, some tough-as-nails New Yorkers were braving it to walk leisurely along Columbus. Restaurants were full, pastry shops were jam-packed. In many boutiques, clerks suffered the strain of keeping up with business, while in other, emptier boutiques, clerks suffered the strain of wondering if they would ever know what business is.

Larry met Jill outside a Korean grocery, from which he purchased dendrebium orchids and two yellow roses. Larry's horticultural offering caused Jill, who prided herself on being fashionably jaded, every young love sensation imaginable.

"Thank you, Larry ... they're beautiful."

Larry, for his part, gazing at Jill as she tilted her nose into a rose bud, noticed once more that this Hellenic face was too beautiful for words.

"I hope the cold won't hurt my flowers," commented Jill, pouting, fluttering her lashes, "nothing so pretty should be this vulnerable."

"I don't know ... I mean, some great literature would be *rien de tout* if pretty things weren't vulnerable. Besides, the sense of imminent wilt, death and rot makes a cut flower poignant, don't you think?"

"I don't wanna think anything, right now," said Jill, who, despite herself, went on thinking. "It's been a busy day at MacGregor, DiGiovanni and Finkelstein. I'm bushed."

"Too bushed to walk? We *could* stop someplace, for candlewarmed XO cognac."

"No, really. The fresh air will do me good."

The fresh air was soon stirred by a wintry breeze, in which fluttered a scrap of foil that grazed Larry's forehead. Larry caught the foil. Jill frowned.

"Litter bugs are contemptible. What is that?"

"A discarded prophylactic wrapper."

"How New York! Maybe next the used condom will come along on a wind, ever so gently."

"Might be a good harbinger for my father's business, if it did."

"I thought your father was in advertising."

"He is. Exclusively assigned to the FMP condom account."

"FMP?"

"Fuck me please."

"Crude!"

Larry said nothing as Jill worried about the effect of her condemnation. Committing a civilized act, Larry placed the condom wrapper in a public trash can. Jill affected self-deprecation.

"What do I know? FMP will probably sell big."

"Hopefully. How was your day at the agency?"

"Complex, and now I'd like to simplify, simplify, by not talking about my day. Even were I in the mood, I wouldn't give *you* the nittygritty on what we're doing. You're an aspiring writer, somebody who might steal our ideas."

"Tosh! Rubbish! Poppycock!" protested Larry, faking a British accent. "I plan to use my own bloody ideas."

"So, what are they?"

"Scintillating, but I won't spill the beans to you. Your agency might run off with my intellectual property."

Larry and Jill passed a school courtyard where four shirtless teenagers were playing basketball in the subfreezing weather. Jill stopped a moment to smell her roses. At the sight of her sniffing them, Larry felt velvety inside.

"I've been fretting over the nose problem," he confessed.

"Something wrong with your nose?" inquired Jill, before kissing it. "No. "

Larry reflected a moment and then asked with palpable apprehension:

"You don't think anything's wrong with my nose, do you?"

"Not at all, it's a nice nose."

"Nice? Nice?!? See why I cogitate the nose problem?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, because the human proboscis is so damned hard to describe, I worry that nose description will present insurmountable difficulties to me as a writer."

"Have you lost your marbles through your nostrils?"

"Not so much as a cat's eye. Let's say somebody has a small and perfect nose. What can one possibly write about such a schnozz that'll vividly etch it into a reader's mind?" "Gogol would know, I imagine. But trust me; you can trick the average reader into not caring about noses. Emphasize instead the maddening little hassles and semi-unbearable hardships of your characters' lives."

"But in a work of literature, every word should count. I mean, writers must describe things great and small ... states of mind ... moral atmospheres ... eternal truths ...perhaps some eternal lies .... and, at the fitting moment, a writer must even be able to describe a nose, brilliantly."

"So, how does my nose look to you?"

"Small and perfect."

Jill, with slight pressure from a forefinger, momentarily transformed her small, perfect nose into a perfect pig snout. Larry, pointing his own forefinger heavenwards, wanting very much to look like Demosthenes pacing Columbus Avenue, continued:

"The question remains, by what means can a writer make his readers understand exactly how perfect and small a small and perfect nose is?"

"Larry! Unless you pair Pinocchio with Cyrano de Bergerac or Barbara Streisand with Janet Jackson, noses just won't be very important in your books."

Larry and Jill finished their stroll. When Jill arrived home, she put the flowers Larry had given her in a crystal vase and they lived, briefly.

\* \* \*

Immediately after lunch Friday, Mr. Betts had David Cooper into his office for an informal though serious business chat, which moved forthrightly for two minutes and thirteen seconds, then took off on a tangent, exploring Mr. Betts's daughter's gall stone operation, Mr. Betts's opinion of Morton Downey, Jr. and a Betts family vacation in Palm Beach, Florida.

A ringing phone spared David from hearing about dolphins jumping through Hula-Hoops.

After the call, Mr. Betts reassumed his role of goal-oriented businessman, sending David away with an admonition to brainstorm apropos of applying 'Total Marketing' techniques to the Fuck Me Please account.

David walked officewards, interfaced with Marianne Martins by advising her he didn't want to be disturbed, entered his office and closed the door. Sitting at his desk, he thought earnestly, albeit constipatedly, about a marriage between 'Total Marketing' techniques and FMP. Then he made a short-term decision to drink some Evian water.

"Total Marketing," David thought, settling squarely in his chair, resolutely placing a glass of Evian beside his communications console. "We must identify FMP's target markets, in isolation, and then invent the *best* ways of hitting those targets. Advertising alone isn't enough, we need innovative marketing approaches to reach each isolated target."

As David's critical faculties put in their two cents' worth, he suffered an oppressive moment wondering if this 'Total Marketing' razzmatazz wasn't just a shellacking of banal garble over the vulgar plank of advertising life. Coaxing his thoughts back from their precipice, however, David resumed his FMP 'Total Marketing' brainstorming. "How might we build a consumer base in the high-school clinic market? We wouldn't stress the product's integral name - might upset parents and teachers. But we *could* circumspectly spread the Fuck Me Please message, distributing little faux-brass pins to high-school clinic workers, pins that would show two smiling teenagers, holding between them a wrapped condom, printed FMP. The teenagers' smiles, seen framing a discreetly labeled condom, would put across the idea that using FMP leads young people to wholesome happiness."

David sipped his Evian and then lifted his brow, realizing the costly water in his glass truly did taste better than the chlorine cocktails served through Manhattan's faucets. A blip came from the fake-ficus-shaded fax machine, whose lower panel turned luminiferously green. David was under attack from a 'fax hacker', who was misappropriating Betts, Gibber & Fibber's resources to send an unsolicited promotion for carpet cleaning services. Having wasted time reading the message,

# MR. DAVID COOPER'S HAPPY SUICIDE

David threw it away and then returned to Fuck Me Please thinking, simultaneously laboring at discovering a means of staving off fax hackers. The counterpoint jangled him, but through the jangling, he continued refining his idea for building an FMP consumer base in high-school clinics.

Interspersed with many sips of Evian water, he had more ideas for applying 'Total Marketing' techniques to the FMP account. Toward day's end, he reported back to Mr. Betts, who granted that the pin idea *might* be worth using in a client presentation.

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