

I am traveling in a wagon pulled by a 20-mule team to a meeting of an extraordinary committee of which I am the chairman. I have no idea when I will arrive, but certainly much later than the members expect.

No doubt I will be pelted with complaints. The members of this committee are among the most arrogant specimens of humanity that ever graced the Earth. Czar Nicholas for example. For him every second of his time is more precious than all the gold in Krasnoyarsk. Even though he never does anything.

And Mickey Mantle, who uses his 555 foot home run over and over as a metaphor for the will of popular power expressed in an elected autocracy. I can never understand why anyone argues with him about it. Just let it go.

Then there is Oppenheimer. Insufferable. We remove all artifacts from the walls before he arrives; yet he still insists on identifying the origin, age, and place in cultural development of each one just from the markings left on the wall by the mounting screws. Sometimes I wonder if he is just making this shit up. How would anyone know?

We have Regina Bismarck Smith, a descendant of the Chancellor. She inherited his lust for authority. At every meeting she asks for plenary power to coordinate defense of the committee against armed assaults on its prerogatives and that a mobile strike force be put at her disposal for that purpose. Each time the members unanimously agree and move on to other business.

Our vice-chair is Molly Davidowitz, a retired actress, known for supporting roles in the moderately successful films *The Babe Who Blew Up Baltimore* and *Show Me The Greens: The Fuzzy Zoeller Story*. She also was renowned as the very strong-willed administrator of a charitable foundation called "Stand Up for Tomorrow". With her peerless powers of persuasion she raised millions for the foundation, even though no one seemed to know its purpose.

Molly is fearless and does not shy from provoking hostility, which can be dangerous with some persons. Like the James brothers. Molly questioned their preoccupation with gold bullion over greenbacks. "Maybe you'd like a little taste

of silver," Jesse snapped at her, spinning the cartridge on his .45 and aiming it at her head. Fortunately, Frank intervened to explain that occasionally they need to shoot someone to complete a job and they preferred not to waste a homicide for currency that is susceptible to declining value from inflation.

We usually have a guest at each meeting. Last time we had Hugh Hefner. What was left of him anyway -- after decades expending more sexual energy than any other mortal man ever has. Two ravishing beauties arrived carrying a gold velvet robe with a smoking pipe hanging between the lapels. They asked where we wanted him and deposited the robe on the guest chair.

Out of the robe emerged what looked like a poorly preserved mummy head with a pipe stuck between its lips. With a leap of faith I said "How do you do, Mr. Hefner. Thank you for coming." The pipe nodded. That was Hef's contribution to the meeting. Meanwhile his entourage hovered about, mercilessly distracting the chairman.

Today we are fortunate to have Marina Oswald. To discuss her new book containing previously undisclosed facts about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Her most intriguing revelation, and the one I am most eager to question her about, is that the man in the photos holding the rifle was not her husband Lee. It was Don Knotts, who Marina claims was the real assassin.

The committee answers only to a set of mysterious corporate officers whom I have never seen. They monitor our meetings electronically and disrupt our proceedings if we stray even slightly from the esoteric format they prescribed.

Take the meeting we tried to have with guest participant Robert Fulton, inventor of the first operational steamboat. He was about to begin his presentation when one of the officers suddenly declared that we had not satisfied the required preliminary sampling procedure. No one knew what she was talking about. Fulton, who had to travel there through spacetime utilizing only an 18th century steam-powered gondola, was frightened by the disruption and could not continue.

The officers also are fanatics about security. For access to a meeting we must pass an absurdly rigorous screening process. We are placed naked in a concrete vault, where an electronic body scanner searches for cellular abnormalities, nervous anomalies, and subversive mental content. Urine, blood, snot, saliva, and stool samples are extracted. The sentinels might require us to

identify Homo Australopithecus among photographs of hominids, to chisel the chemical formula for aluminum sulfate into the wall, and/or build a tugboat with Legos dipped in linseed oil.

A motorcycle cop is hovering alongside the wagon signaling for me to pull over. “You are violating Traffic Ordinance 4.343 by taking a full 20-mule team through a 14-mule maximum zone.” He writes up a ticket and orders me to exit that restricted roadway at the first opportunity.

I did not know. This is my first experience traveling by mule team. Before I became chairman of the committee I traveled by motor car, like most people.

One of the lucky few at my high school to have a car, I drove a modified Studebaker Daytona convertible that came to me when my grandfather died of a heart attack while trying to have sex with one of his companions at the assisted living center. The only addition it needed was an amplifier so I could blast FM radio beats across the blocks between my house and the school.

I wanted people to notice me. Especially the female people. Way too shy and timid to approach them directly, I figured a bass boom they could feel would attract them to at least ask for a ride. But the only girls who ever rode with me in that car were not the kind I dreamt about.

It was not that they were ugly or fat or smelled bad, although some were and did. They were vulgar and mean. Treated me like their chauffeur, ordering me to drive by the convenience store so they could buy cigarettes or along the parkway where they shouted obscenities at other girls hanging out on the sidewalk.

The worst of it was that after the first time I let them ride with me they claimed a right to do so whenever they pleased. If I hesitated one of them would wrap a chain around my neck, yank my head close to hers, and, breathing Camel tobacco smoke at me at close range, snarl “how ‘bout it?”

As a result of my apparent willingness to be the chick posse’s chump I never developed a positive reputation among the girls I would have preferred to know. Even after I stopped driving the Studebaker, so the nasties would leave me alone, it was too late to cure the injury to my image. Hence I remained a lone

nobody for the rest of my high school career.

I drove the car to Diller, Ohio for my first year at Jane Mansfield University, hopeful that it would bring me better luck there. We did not make it. About 100 miles out of Diller the engine began to smoke. The car lurched to a stop. A leak had drained the oil pan and my driving it so far without oil had disabled the vehicle to the extent that repair was not worth the cost. The Studebaker was towed to a junk yard. I arrived at JMU in the most miserable condition possible: Carless.

Which meant loveless and sexless as well. Without even fancy wheels to make up for a lack of masculine charm, my prospects for romance fizzled even amidst an abundance of alluring coeds.

I had to thank the dormitory for the few acquaintances I did acquire – all male. Dorm living was too close and personally intense for someone to survive without making any friends. And I was pretty much a regular guy. I drank as much beer as the next one, wasted as many hours staring at sports on TV, did my laundry three or four times a year, talked about girls like I was the expert.

None of the courses I took sustained my interest beyond the second week of each semester. It did not help that they were all required. And two weeks, twelve hours of class time, in an introductory US History class, just to cover the mercantilist roots of the Louisiana Purchase? A term paper on the structure and function of the endoplasmic reticulum? A group research project and presentation on the symbolic use of pronouns in the works of Zane Grey? For me college seemed to be all about indulging the professors' obsessions.

After struggling through two semesters to a C- grade point average, and enduring the humiliation of one too many “no thanks” from the ladies, I gave up. Stayed in Diller. And looked for a job.

The only offer I received of any kind was to be an unarmed security guard patrolling an eight-unit strip mall in the Broccoli Crown area of Diller. So for two years I was a uniformed presence outside Knottseau Dry Cleaners, Scrambler Insurance, Horatio Fong's Chinese and Irish Take Out, Day and Night Pharmacy, The Law Office of Melvin Mussolini, and Dusty and Useless Electronics.

I also watched over a stand-alone fast food dispensary called Cooked

Meat Express. I routinely bought the Cooked Meat Power Lunch Combo: Raccoon ribs, coyote liver, and a basket of smelts – all cooked. Hence the motto they used in what little advertising they did: “We cook our meat”.

When I first started the job I was compelled to get there by taking the city bus, which required two transfers. It also required much more patience than I had to wait in line for the regular elderly passengers to scale the steps into the bus, search in their purses for coins to pay the fare, argue with the driver about the amount, having forgotten the ten fare hikes that had occurred since they were only charged a nickel, and contend that as seniors they should not have to pay anything, in fact that the bus driver should pay them to ride on his bus. I needed a car.

So I was susceptible to the lure of the Sears Silver Special, the only automobile model Sears ever sold. There was a Sears store in Diller that featured an adjoining car showroom displaying the two models of the Special available instore. Two more models were offered, but only through the catalog. One afternoon I stopped at Sears to buy some socks and for the first time entered through the showroom.

Catching a glimpse of the Silver Special Coupe glistening there on a rotating platform with a sexy model at the wheel, I was entranced. And after the sales associate acquainted me with all the Special’s special features, after I test drove it halfway to Akron and back, and after we settled on a price that was only a couple of thousand more than my credit limit, which he cajoled the credit department into increasing just enough to cover what the college fund my grandfather also left me did not, that baby was mine! The sales guy even threw in the two pairs of socks I needed.

That thing was hyper cool. A two-seater with some extra space behind large enough for a briefcase. Six cylinders of internal combustibleness, a hi-fi system booming bass beats that could be felt for blocks, and unique vinyl upholstery that had the look and feel of real leather. Before and after work I would cruise around Diller, again trying to catch the eyes and ears of the ladies.

Unfortunately, that was still all I caught in those days. Not one babe asked to join me in the Special, and I remained too shy and sullen to invite them. Moreover, I had no physical magnetism that could overcome my inept efforts at smooth talk. But providing pretend security for the strip mall would have a

surprising consequence.

For the most part the job was pretty dull. Eight hours of watching people and cars. The only stimulating aspects were the conversations I had every day with the myriad specimens of humanity that frequent strip malls. Having nothing else to do, I was always available for a chat with the drag clown waiting for the cleaners to finish starching his bloomers, the Fongs' cooks who would come out periodically for fresh air and cigarettes, Mussolini's secretary out killing time while her boss met with a sexual predator client in their tiny office, the 110-year old living fossil showing me the RCA vacuum tube she needed for her Philco Model 90 Cathedral Radio. By the day I threw my uniform in the recycling bin I could talk about anything with anyone.

The only noteworthy day in my tenure at the strip mall was my last one. A week past my two-year anniversary on the job an incident occurred that inspired me to find a different occupation. I was leaning against one of the concrete planter boxes chomping on a Snickers bar, when I saw a woman running towards me, waving her arms and shouting "robbing the pharmacy". Like that had anything to do with me, I thought. Then I remembered, horrifyingly: I am the security guard.

Acting only on stupid impulse, I ran to the front of the pharmacy just as two dudes in ski masks burst out the door holding gym bags in one hand and pistols in the other. One of them saw me, stopped, and jabbed the barrel of his gun into the side of my head. The last thing I remember is how foul the guy smelled, like a clogged toilet in a public bathroom. Lucky for me, he did not pull the trigger. Instead, he knocked me unconscious with the butt of the gun.

I came to on a gurney in the emergency room. A cop asked me what I remembered about the incident. Only the smell. So after they arrested someone I was called as a witness – to testify about the smell. It turned out the guy was fired the morning of the robbery from a temp job at the waste treatment facility, after he opened a valve that released sewer gas into his work area.

We are now traversing a Walmart parking lot, trying to reach Jed Clampett Boulevard. Clearly none of these shoppers moving out of our way has ever seen a 20-mule team in the flesh. Some are staring at us with wonder. Most

are colored with anger that anybody would dare desecrate that hallowed ground with multiple pounds of mule shit.

I am getting hungry. I will offer a passerby cash to obtain food. Really hungry and late for a meeting. Twenty bucks if she will stroll over to that KFC and get me a three-piece combo. She's not sure. Look, I'm ready to trust you. You could just take my money and disappear. Ok she'll do it. I hand her 40 dollars and off she goes.

Here she comes. Bless her heart, she is carrying a big bag with the colonel's face on it. She ordered extra, figuring that maybe other people at the meeting will want some. Will she ride with me for a little bit? Declining the invitation, she passes on and out of my life.

But she leaves me with a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, hefty tubs of mashed potatoes, baked beans, sauerkraut, ferret blood chowder, scrambled pterodactyl eggs, and a few other items I did not even know KFC offered. Plus about 50 dinner rolls, a two liter bottle of Dr. Pepper, and a giant wad of plastic ware, napkins, salt, pepper, and packets of transmission fluid. I have at it. I will eat it all. Screw the others.