

THE BAGUETTE CODE

I.

“What?”

“Have you read La Stampa this morning?”

“What time is it? And who the fuck is calling?”

“Todd, it’s Cardinal Bishoff and it’s noon. Are you still in bed?”

“Jesus, Bishoff. Yes, I’m still in bed. Was out late with those Italian Vogue models.”

“Carla and Marina?”

“Yeah. I blacked out but I think they came home with me.”

“You think?”

“There are two passed out chicks in my bed. Can’t see their faces, but I know those asses.”

“God bless those asses.”

“Goddamn right. What’s this shit with La Stampa?”

“Guess who’s being presented with an Opus Dei Fashion Award?”

“Bishoff, you didn’t—”

“Ha!”

“Christ, Bish. Do you know what this is going to do to my street cred?”

“Two nights ago you were bitching about not having any money, and an O-Dei Award comes with a two-hundred thousand dollar prize, so I thought—”

“Did you say two hundred grand?”

“Yep. I put in a call to Cardinal Sanchez who’s on the board, and presto, Todd Barrel is locked in for an O-Dei.”

“That easy?”

“I’ve got dirt on all these old fags, so I get what I want.”

“One finger on the pulse of the Holy See and the other—”

“Looking for the G Spot on a Croatian tramp.”

“You’re a man after my own heart, Bish. I owe you one.”

“Buy me dinner tonight.”

“Right. What time did you want to meet up?”

“Eleven thirty.”

“Better make it twelve.”

“Midnight, Café Caligula.”

“Ciao, Cardinal.”

“A Dio, Barrel.”

Well, who doesn’t like waking up to a 200K purse from the Pope? That cash would see me through the month and cover the hotel bill that I had been racking up at the St. Regis in Rome. Due to my previous financial straits, I had taken a quick consulting gig from my father, being dispatched to Rome

to stir up international sales of Cracker Barrel Processed Cheese Product. The Italians have a real snout-nosed policy forbidding foreign cheese product manufacturers from labeling their stuff 100% cheese. I was lobbying government officials to drop this ban for Cracker Barrel International by doing what I do best—wining, dining and flat out bribing corrupt Latin magistrates.

Cardinal Joey Bishoff was the number-one guy on the Cracker Barrel payroll. His influence in Rome and the Vatican were considerable, and his penchant for decadent excess made us fast friends. That night at Café Caligula was one for the books. Upon arrival, one is served wine and escorted on a raised walkway above pits filled with wild animals. The patron then chooses his game for the meal and watches it slaughtered by bikini-clad, female gladiators.

I chose a sizable boar that was cut down by a Barbarella look alike. Cardinal Bishoff’s peacock was strangled by a sexy Phoenician. The next course involved an octopus battle in a large tank with the loser going into hot oil and coming out delicious calamari. The endless stream of rich food was followed by streams of vomit. The half-naked palm bearers held my hair.

The most impressive course was the barbecue sperm whale ribs wheeled in on a full sized schooner. On top was a man dressed as Poseidon, jabbing the ribs with his trident and throwing them down to us to savagely eat with our hands. After more drinking and vomiting, Bishoff and I repaired to the orgy room, where a full menu of carnal delights was available for order. I looked over at Bishoff, who was sitting in a Roman bath, surrounded by female flesh.

“Bishoff!”

“Talk louder, I’ve got a tongue in my ear.”

“Good times, good people.”

“Good times, Barrel. Good fucking times.”

“What should I wear to the Opus Dei Fashion Awards tomorrow?”

“It’s being held in the Grotto of Lourdes—business casual. Just make sure you’re wearing pants.”

II.

As you know, the Barrels are a family without religion. Godless though we may be, I am equipped to adopt whatever beliefs might benefit me at the moment. I maneuvered brilliantly in Rome with a wallet full of 16 baby photos that I claimed to be my children. My disdain for condoms earned me Brownie points with the natives, and answering questions with the riposte, “Does the Pope wear a funny hat?” put most Catholics at ease.

I met up with Cardinal Bishoff in front of St. Peter’s and he walked me through the piazza.

“You’re white as a sheet, Barrel.”

“Hung over, your Excellency.”

“You still smell like sperm whale and Astroglide.”

“I don’t know how you do it. You look fresh as a daisy.”

“Before passing out, I always say a prayer and pound a quart of Pedialyte.”

“Just give me a shot of Benedictine and I’ll be fine.”

“So this is the game plan. There’s going to be a small guided tour and then everyone will pile into the

Grotto. There’s a runway show featuring the latest in ankle cut skirts and then the CEO of JC Penny will give a short speech. Afterwards, they’ll call up the winners one by one and present them with a pouch full of gold Roman coins valued at 200K.”

“I love me some gold.”

“Now, the coins are largely ceremonial because the winners are expected to place them back into the coffers as charity but if you don’t put them into the donation box, I don’t think they’ll forcefully take them from you.”

“What if they ask for them back?”

“Oh, they’ll certainly ask for them back. Just make up something like ‘my son’s in the hospital’ or ‘cancer victims in Africa.’”

“I can do that.”

In the piazza, the Cardinal and I met up with a gathering of O-Dei individuals dressed in comely, off-the-rack cotton/poly blends. My yellow Brioni suit was perhaps not the most appropriate choice for the day but I did look dashing nonetheless. Talking to the group was a young nun, perhaps 27, with coffee bean brown skin and the face of Latino angel. Her straight black hair was tucked behind her ear ever so cautiously. A nun’s habit is not revealing, so my brain went into overdrive, visually measuring her height, guestimating her weight and cross referencing them with her bone structure. My suspicion was confirmed—there was a perfect set of cans trapped underneath the black and white and Todd Barrel needed to liberate them.

Bishoff introduced us.

“Sister Maria Consuelo Cachaca Ramirez Toledo Turbo Verdugo de Batecabaillos, this is Todd Barrel.”

I kissed her hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sister Maria Consulez Tordugas—”

“You can call me Sister Maria, Mr. Barrel.”

“You can call me Todd. Or my friends call me Dusty Nutz.”

“I’ll call you Todd.”

“Very well, Sister.”

“I will be leading your tour for the beginning of the afternoon. Have you ever been to the Vatican, Todd?”

“Hell, yes, I’ve been to the Vatican. Three nights ago Bishoff and I met these chicks at the train station and took them back to the papal—”

The Cardinal elbowed me in the stomach.

“Sister Maria, you’ll have to excuse Mr. Barrel. He has an unfortunate medical condition but is still a child of God.”

“I will take good care of him, Cardinal.”

Sister Maria started up the tour, guiding us through the Palace of St. George and giving background on the frescoes of cavorting cherubs. I nodded and pretended to listen while the same question repeatedly raced through my mind: How am I going to get Sister Maria in the sack? I decided that a

little Barrel charm always provided the best ice-breaker, so I walked next to her while we traversed the Vatican gardens.

“Sister Maria, you look very...religious in that habit.”

“Thank you, Todd. I think.”

“How long have you been married to Jesus?”

“Five years.”

“First marriage? Previously divorced?”

“Let’s not talk about me. I am simply a servant of God. What about you? Excited about your award?”

“I’m ecstatic. Not sexually, of course. More like St. Teresa.”

“It’s a special day. Many special things are happening here today besides the O-Dei’s.”

“Knights of Columbus Emmys?”

“Actually, The Holy Father is brokering a historic peace accord between Parti Quebecois and Canada. It’s been all over the news for weeks.”

“I’m not a big reader.”

Minus two points for Todd Barrel. Current events are my strong point only if I’m involved in them. Anyway, who the fuck cares about Canada and their cum-chugging, French speaking bastard children? Just as I was gearing up for round two of banter with Sister Maria, a massive explosion sounded and puffs of black smoke rose above St. Peter’s in the distance.

“We’ve got a new pope, people!”

“That’s white smoke, Todd.”

“Then we’ve got a problem.”

“Maybe a gas main broke.”

Both theories proved false as gunshots crackled throughout the air. Something bad was happening. I assumed alpha male and corralled all the Opus Dei fashionistas into the closest building, the Ethiopian College. We made a ruckus barging into the reading room full of deeply religious Ethiopian scholars. I asked if anyone knew what was going on and was met with a tidal wave of ‘ssshhhhh!’

The south wall was then hit by a mortar. The explosion was ear-shattering, throwing hundreds of books off shelves and leaving a wide, gaping hole in the College. I pulled Sister Maria behind the card catalogs and covered her for protection. And erection. Six well-armed terrorists dressed in red, white and blue parachute pants and wife beaters jogged in and fired off a few shots. I peaked out behind C400-D230. Upon closer inspection the terrorists sported haircuts way too expensive for American men. The stench of heavy cream sauce confirmed it—Quebec Separatists. Tits! These faux French faggots were seriously harshing on my pickup game with the Sister. They rounded up everyone and marched them out by gunpoint. Sister Maria and I remained hidden.

“Todd, what’s going on?”

“Either the Quebecois terrorists want to stop the peace accord or are very upset that the O-Dei’s were rigged.”

“We’ve got to do something.”

“Hold on, sugar tits. I’m not going to get my nuts blown off for some peace accord. Let’s hang here and recite Leviticus to each other.”

“Todd, it’s our duty to the Holy Father and peace on earth.”

I started thinking with my dick and concluded that I would lose her completely if I continued to act like such a pussy.

“If we’re going to do this, we’ve got to gather information and get word to the outside.”

“You sound like you’ve done this before?”

“If I had a dime for every time a lady has said that to me, I—”

“Let’s go.”

“Amen.”

We crept outside and found a trellis leading up the side of the Galleria Pintura di Papa, the Pope’s private art gallery. Sister Maria climbed up first and I followed. I could see up her habit. What do nuns wear? G-string? Granny panty? Chastity belt? Boxers? Briefs? It’s none of the above, brothers and sisters. Sister Maria was free ballin’ it—trim in the wind.

The peep show ended as we topped the trellis and crept over to a row of large windows looking down into the gallery. Inside were detained Swiss guards in their silly uniforms and the Pope tied to a gold throne. The terrorists were torturing him by playing Edith Piaf at high decibels. I’d rather have a hood on my head and a car battery attached to my nipples than receive long-term exposure to French café music.

“We’ve got to find out what’s happening, Todd.”

“There’s no way we can get in there. Security’s tighter than an altar boy’s ass on Easter Sunday.”

“The Pope loves charades. We can get up in the window and play.”

“Game on, Sis.”

Sister Maria and I went up to the window and positioned ourselves so that only Papa could see us. She caught his attention and flashed the international symbol for charades which, by the way, is the same gesture for ‘I just fellated your goat’ in Romanian. The Pope was quick to start the game but had difficulty as he was all roped up. We did our best.

“First word...two syllables...sounds like...licking...groping...thumbing.”

“Sis, did he just do what I thought he did?”

“Flirting! Sounds like flirting.”

“He did.”

“First letter...same as...boar...thief...dragon...dog...dog!”

“This is nuts.”

“Dirting. Dirty! First word is Dirty.”

“I should have known.”

“Second word...little word...one syllable.”

“Dirty Pope.”

“Todd, you’re not helping...sounds like...conductor...tennis...praying...breathing?”

“Bong!”

“Excellent, Todd. Sounds like bong...dirty bong...dirty blonde...dirty song...dirty bomb. Dirty bomb!”

“Fucking tits, the Quebecois brought a dirty bomb to the Vatican.”

Just as the Sister and I triumphantly won the game, the windows of the gallery shattered. Fabio-esque gunmen stood behind us, smoking cigars and looking grim. A big thug spoke.

“Les jeux sont fait.”

“Fuck you, Maple dick.”

I threw open my yellow Brioni jacket and pulled the ivory Uzis. My little white buddies never failed. .45 caliber death nuggets sprayed out and provided cover for Sister Maria and me. We protected ourselves behind two carved angels. Quebecois gunfire came after us, but Michael and Gabriel’s wings stopped their deadly advances. I countered with the Uzis and realized that we were outnumbered.

Sister Maria and I climbed down the side of the building and made a bee line across the gardens. Bullets flared, tearing up hedges and innocent shrubbery. We found safe haven in a small chapel while the terrorists searched in vain. When the coast was clear, I spoke.

“A dirty bomb is some serious shit, Sister.”

“We’ve got to get word to the police.”

“Fuck that. The city would erupt into chaos—widespread pizza looting and scooter theft would tear Rome apart.”

“What’s the other option?”

“The other option is the only option. We take care of it with Barrel know-how and Sister’s faith.”

“Faith can move mountains.”

“And Uzis kill mofos.”

There was a payphone in a nearby confessional. I dropped in a few Euros and started dialing.

“Chiachfeld Laboratories and Research Facility.”

“Rhonda, this is Todd Barrel. Get me A.Q. Chiachfeld. Pronto!”

“Mr. Barrel, Mr. Chiachfeld is out of the office. May I take a message?”

“Rhonda, this ain’t no courtesy call. I need Chiachfeld, now.”

“He’s currently doing research on the Mir Space Station. I’ll try and patch you through. Hold please.”

Chiachfeld Laboratories hold music was sweet—Van Halen’s 1984 album. I was rocking out to “Panama” when Chiachfeld got on the line.

“Todd, old man. Cheerio. I’m in space.”

“Got a big fucking problem, A.Q. Quebecois separatists have taken over the Vatican to quash a peace accord and they have a dirty bomb.”

“What kind of dirty bomb?”

“How should I know?”

“Well, an RDD, Radioactive Dispersal Device, could be many things. It could be uranium, a cesium isotope, or weapons-grade kitty litter.”

“Well, what do French Canadian separatists usually use?”

“Hmmm. There is an old reactor outside Chibougamau. I think it used depleted francium.”

“Fucking Frenchies and their francium! How can we stop them, Chiachfeld?”

“My Russian counterpart here at Mir, Dr. Boris Tartikoff, has been experimenting with radioactive

antidotes and had some success.”

“How much success?”

“He cured a Chernobyl puppy of meningitis. Ten minutes. Fast acting relief.”

“Sweet. Tell him to send us a batch of his magic.”

“Might take a little while. The only samples are up here at the space station.”

“Tits!”

“If you can find suitable space craft, you could be here and back in a day.”

“If we only knew where to find a free shuttle.”

Sister Maria was filing her nails and chimed in very blasé.

“The Pope has a space shuttle. It’s parked behind St. Peter’s. Nobody uses it. Richard Branson gave it to Papa for christening his son on St. Barth’s.”

I got back on the phone.

“Chiachfeld, we’ll be there shortly. What’s your address?”

III.

We snuck through unguarded corridors and knaves and finally arrived behind St. Peter’s. The only thing I could see was a huge stone sculpture of Moses.

“Sister, are we going to ride Moses humpback into space?”

“Watch this.”

Sister Maria walked over to a fake rock and pulled out a set of keys. Bleep. Bleep. A rumbling noise came from Moses and smoke poured out from under his dress. The statue began to crumble, arms falling off and tablets smashing against the ground. The dust cleared to reveal a gleaming Virgin™ space rocket, engine purring and ready to blast off.

“Holy camouflage, Sister.”

“Holy indeed. I’ll drive.”

“Shotgun!”

We seated ourselves in the cockpit and prepared for launch. I checked my hair in the visor and Maria searched for some Latin radio. We were ready. T-minus five, four, three, two, one and lift off. Large billows of smoke shot from the afterburners. As we came up, we could see terrorists guarding the wall with thousands of police, military and religious pilgrims surrounding the Vatican. The separatists took a few shots at us but we were long gone. Everything became smaller as we pushed into the final frontier.

Once we got into orbit, Maria hit the autopilot and we relaxed.

“So, Maria. You’re really into this church thing.”

“Jesus saved me from dying.”

“Of what?”

“Of sadness.”

“Sounds pretty angsty.”

“I was a young girl, 17 years old when I fell in love.”

“With Jesus?”

“With Ramón. He was five years older than me. He loved poetry, farming, Colombia, and me. We married and were very happy for two weeks until the FARC donkeynapped Ramón’s trusty mule, Pedrito.”

“What happened?”

“Ramón went to the leftist guerilla’s coca plantation and demanded his donkey back. He said ‘I am but a simple farmer. I work hard. I want to have a family. I need Pedrito to plant the plantains. Can’t you find another burro for your cocaine mill?’”

“What the FARC wants, the FARC takes.”

“Yes. They nailed Ramón to a cross and dragged him through the streets of my village.”

“And Pedrito?”

“They sold him to a brothel.”

The widow Maria began weeping. I slid over and wrapped my arms around her, consoling her shaking hands. I stroked her flaxen hair and held her body close to mine. Her hot Colombian flesh pressed against me. The swelling in my pants grew stronger. She looked up and our eyes locked. Her wet lips moved closer to mine, slowly until I could smell her minty fresh breath. Mere centimeters lay between our tongues when a loud alarm sounded. She pulled back.

“What is it, Maria?”

“Space radar. I have a visual on the Mir.”

IV.

At first glance the Mir Space Station appears to be a futuristic mélange of expertly crafted space pods gracefully spinning in the astral void. Upon closer inspection, one sees that it’s a mish-mash of Soviet era missiles and tanks welded and duct taped together with the precariousness of the Russian economy.

We docked our shuttle and made our way into the station. It was decorated very chic by 1960’s standards. The Russians are always a little behind the trend curve but the bubble seats and shag carpet were welcoming all the same. Chiachfeld greeted us upon exit from the air lock.

“Todd Barrel, you old gent.”

“How the fuck are you, A.Q.?”

“Jolly good. Jolly good. Many important studies.”

“Like what?”

“Like the effect of zero gravity on a nymy. I spend a good amount of time redirecting the Hubble telescope towards earth and spying on naked housewives. I’ve got a website, HubbleMilfSpacePeep.com, which is actually doing quite well.”

“A.Q., I’d like you to meet Sister Maria.”

They did a zero gravity hand shake.

“Aloysious Q. Chiachfeld, Viscount of Danderlion.”

“Sister Maria Consuelo Cachaca Ramirez Toledo Turbo Verdugo de Batecabaillos.”

“You’re from Batecabaillos, Colombia?”

“Yes, have you heard of it?”

“Heard of it! My great-great-great-great grandfather, Sir David Banjax Danderlion, was King’s Consort to the Batecabaillos region in 1832. My family was a silent landowner until the FARC repatriated our coca fields.”

“It is a difficult time.”

“Difficult indeed. I’m sure Todd told you about his time down there rescuing orphans.”

“No, he did not.”

I had sent a text to Chiachfeld on my way up to blithely drop this falsified piece of information in order to curry sexual favor with Sister Maria. It worked. She looked at me with the slow burn of lust rekindling inside her. There was sex beneath that habit yet. The whole Danderlions in Batecabaillos was also a sham. The Danderlion coat of arms was about as old as Jefferson Airplane. Chiachfeld’s grandfather won his title in a shakedown scam involving Lord Paddington and an Irish tranny. Deviant royalty!

“Enough small talk, Chiachfeld. Where’s Dr. Tartikoff? We need his anti-radiation potion.”

“The potion is the motion, Barrel.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

Chiachfeld buzzed Dr. Tartikoff on the intercom and beckoned him forth to the Space Station bar where we sipped G & T’s out of mylar bags. Dr. Tartikoff wore a red spacesuit and smelled like vodka and cut hay. The overgrown beard gave him an air of mad scientist.

“I am Dr. Tartikoff.”

“Todd Barrel, doctor. This is Sister Maria. She’s of the cloth, so keep your randy locked down.”

“So zer is a dirty bum in ze Vatican.”

“Dirty bums in the attic? Maybe. But we’ve got bigger fish to fry, doc. Quebecois dick heads want to turn Rome into a Three Mile Island and the sis and I need your antidote.”

“You must find ze bum and schprinkl ze dust on top.”

“In America we call that salting the fries.”

“In Russia, pickle ze fish.”

“I guess we’re not all that different, doc.”

“You must find ze bum.”

“Can you help us out, Tartikoff?”

“I can scan ze Vatican with radioactive meters with ze Hubble.”

“Sweet. When you get the location, text message me the coordinates.”

“Long live America.”

“Long live Mother Russia.”

We toasted to our cross-cultural cooperation and quickly reboarded our space craft. Though we were only on the Mir a half hour, the goodbyes were tearful. Chiachfeld presented the Sister with a limited edition Franklin Mint Mir Space Station spoon set and the Sister gave him a rosary, hand-carved by

leper children in Mississippi.

The flight back would take us a few hours, so we reclined our seats and chatted.

“Todd, though you may not like to show it, you’re a very compassionate man.”

“Sister, don’t confuse compassion with sex appeal.”

“I hate violence but the way you handle your ivory Uzis is...impressive.”

“You mean hot.”

“I do.”

“Sister, come sit on my lap.”

“OK.”

The habit unzipped. The bra unsnapped. The shoes stayed on. And the Todd got off. Five years of born again virginity had made Sister Maria one horny ass bitch. We did the missionary, conquistador, naughty school girl and dirty astronaut. Tears of ecstasy and joy streamed from off her face and floated in the zero gravity air. God knows what kind of other fluids were gathering in the corners. I dozed off, satiated.

When I awoke, Sister Maria floated before me in a white, skin-tight space suit that highlighted every turn of every curve on her God-chiseled, awe-inspiring body. Pilates pays off.

“Sister Maria, you look fine, woman.”

“I’m no longer Sister Maria. Call me Maria de Batecabaillos, Papal assassin and sex slave to Todd Barrel.”

“I like where your head’s at.”

“We’re going to save Rome and the Pope, Todd. We’re on a mission from God.”

“Fuck yes, we are.”

Entry into the earth’s atmosphere was harrowing. The shuttle heated up and controls went haywire. We were moving much too fast. The earth came rushing towards us at lightning speed.

“Maria, what’s our trajectory?”

“Headed straight for the Vatican, Todd. But I don’t think we can land safely.”

“Maria, prepare for ejection.”

“I’ll prepare you for ejection.”

“You dirty little Colombian.”

Vatican City came at us, faster and faster. A second before impact Maria and I ejected out of the cockpit and pulled our chutes. The Pope’s space ship barreled toward St. Peter’s Basilica and exploded. Bernini’s architectural masterpiece was turned to ruins with blocks of marble raining down and stone saints taking fiery flight. Maria and I landed safely on top of the Pope’s apartment.

I checked my cell for Dr. Tartikoff’s text. Inbox—12 messages. Lisa: where r u? want frontrub?:) Boutros: n peru. need fujimori’s cell#. Exxon 1: so hot 4u! cum over. LOL. Char. TEXAS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: Todd Barrel, you are summoned to testify before the House Ethics Committee. Fujimori: who this boutros? sketchy. Tartikoff: bum n catacomb. tomb of st. placentia.

“Maria. The bomb is in the tomb of Saint Placentia.”

“She is the church’s oldest and most revered saint.”

“Was she martyred for giving epidurals?”

“No. Placentia was the nurse to Stacy of Sharona, Paul’s fifth wife. Placentia delivered Stacy’s first born male, Chadwick, or Chad, and wrapped his umbilical cord around a honey-filled bee hive. She called the hive Runken and took it to the smoking bush, where she slow-cooked it for one fortnight. The next morning, the centurions from Paul’s army ate Runken and attacked the city Sodom, burning it to the ground.”

“That’s some weird Catholic shit, Maria. Is there a fable or a lesson in there that I’m not getting?”

“A miracle is not a fable. It’s a divine sign from God.”

“Ohhhh-kaaaay. Well, let’s get our ass in gear and go visit the placentia-pinching saint.”

“Her tomb is six stories below the Vatican. We must traverse a complicated and dangerous gauntlet of catacombs.”

“Baby, danger is my middle name. And complicated are my finances.”

The catacombs were located directly beneath the Vatican Museum, the foremost repository for priceless art by history’s greatest closeted homosexuals. The Vatican was crawling with French Canadian terrorists and the destruction of St. Peter’s had put the Canuck frogs on high alert. Maria surmised that we had probably killed about thirty terrorists in the explosion and about five times as many tourists. Oh well. It’s all in the name of God.

We crept into the museum and headed through the Pinoteca. Everything was surprisingly quiet until we walked past a group of Indians gathered in the Caravaggio room, admiring his masterwork, “The Mangina of Troy.” The savages wore bandanas round their cocks, feathered headdresses, war paint and buffalo tooth bling. Tomahawks and bows hung from straps on their bodies along with semi-automatic MAC-10 machine guns. This historical anomaly puzzled Maria.

“Todd, who are these people?”

“Creole Seminole mercenaries. Guns for hire. Very dangerous.”

“We must convert them to Christianity.”

“No, Maria. We must convert them to corpses.”

Maria accidentally sneezed, drawing attention to us. The Indians looked over. I tried some New World diplomacy.

“How. We have come to trade beads and malaria blankets for your fertile swathes of land. Please, take this Polish vodka as a gesture of goodwill.”

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on the asshole with a buffalo blanket and pierced nose. These Seminoles weren’t buying my line and knocked their bows pointed in our direction. Arrows flew as Maria and I dove into the corridor. We quickly dusted ourselves off and ran tail between legs down the hall. The angry Seminoles gave chase.

We turned the corner and took refuge in the west wing of the Bob Guccione Collection. Dozens of bare breasted marble and gold statues were peppered about. That Guccione sure has an eye for Renaissance T & A. The Seminoles came in, screaming and shooting. I popped off a few rounds from the Uzis and rolled behind a bust of Aphrodite fellating a Minotaur. Maria pulled out a sixteen inch

Rambo knife from her ankle holster.

The Indians danced around a few corn cobs and then attacked for some hand to hand. I don't know where the fuck Maria learned Kung Fu but she was whipping some serious primitive ass. Out the corner of my eye, I spotted her with her boot on an Indian's back. She grabbed his head and viciously scalped the motherfucker! WTF?

Two Seminoles ran at me with tomahawks cocked in the air. Gentleman's rules don't apply when it comes to battling uncivilized peoples so I let my artillery do the talking and cut down those Indians with my trusty ivory Uzis. Custer would have approved. Two more jumped out from behind. I swiveled and shimmied up a Joan of Arc statue sporting a sword and a hairy bush. Fucking French. The Seminoles bit at my feet like yapping dogs, so I yanked off Joan's marble arm and shoved the sword down one of the savage's throat. With the butt of my gun, I smashed Joan's oversized head until it toppled on the other Indian.

Maria kept collecting scalps until the floor of the Guccione Collection was awash in the blood of the fallen tribesman. I was thoroughly impressed.

“Damn, baby. Where did you get those brutal moves?”

“Before my second marriage to Jesus, and after my husband's death, I was a lieutenant in the Mano Blanco, an anti-communist Colombian paramilitary group.”

“You're a lover and a fighter.”

“It's the will of God.”

“It's the will of Todd to diffuse that bomb. Let's keep moving, sweets.”

“There's an elevator down to St. Placentia's tomb next to the Sistine Chapel.”

“Lead the way and I shall follow.”

We walked through to the antechamber of the Sistine Chapel. An ear shattering noise emanated that sounded like ten locomotives humping at a Harley Davidson rally. Something was definitely not right. Maria and I scaled a secret staircase that led up to a room that looked down into the chapel. Maria said it was used in medieval times by bookies who would spy on the College of Cardinals during the Pope elections. They would keep tabs on the voting progress and periodically send errand boys down to change the odds. Papal handicapping, I think it's called.

What we saw in the Chapel was unbelievable. Massive pneumatic saws were cutting across the top, removing Michelangelo's frescoed masterpiece. The pieces were then being lowered to the ground and crated up by Seminole mercenaries. An impeccably tailored Frenchman walked in and dusted off his Belgian shoes. He rattled off some Creole patois to the Indians and clapped his hands, chop chop, to hurry the workers. It couldn't be.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Do you know this man, Todd?”

“Ferdinand Baguette de Neufchâtel. His father made a fortune in bread. Ferdinand is a certifiable genius and at a young age became one of the foremost art experts in the world until he was disgraced and forced underground.”

“What happened?”

“About six years ago, a string of high profile art heists happened around Europe. Monets, Picassos,

Bellinis, Buttafuocos—all missing. Interpol consulted with him in their investigation. The case went nowhere because it was he who was stealing the paintings and feeding the police false leads. Ferdinand got cocky and decided to steal a heavily guarded and incredibly valuable piece of art by Leonardo entitled, “Dogs Playing Poker.”

“And?”

“And he got busted. Before trial he escaped from prison. His dutiful father couldn’t bear to see his son locked away, so he baked a revolver in a loaf of his eponymous bread and delivered it to Ferdinand. Ferdi took a guard hostage and walked out the door. Never to be seen again...until now.”

“What an amazing story.”

“What an amazing shit head. Never picks up his clothes. Has this ‘lord of the manner’ air about him. Always stealing jerk off mags and leaving them on the bathroom floor with the pages stuck together.”

“How do you know all this, Todd?”

“He was my roommate at boarding school.”

I felt a cold steel gun barrel press against the back of my head. I looked back. Fucking Seminoles!

“Allez!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Allez, allez. I know the drill.”

The Indians marched us at gunpoint into the chapel, where we met with the self-satisfied Frenchman himself, Ferdinand Baguette.

“Monsieur Bar-rel. How long has ees been. Douze ans?”

“Twelve years of bliss, not having your nagging ass around.”

“You never like me, do you? Ees okay. I never like you.”

“What the fuck are you doing, Ferdi?”

“Monsieur, Bar-rel. Can’t you see. It ees ze greatest art heist in historee. I am stealing ze Sistine Chapel.”

“I don’t think there’s a fence big enough to move something this hot.”

“Silly Bar-rel. I am going to ransom it back to ze Vatican...for billions. Eet will be my grea-test work of arte. My masterrpeese!”

“What about the Canuck terrorists?”

“Oh, zose silly provençales? I do not care. I pretende zat I am believing in zer cause and show zem secrete maps and intelligence how to take ze Vatican. Zey know nussing about my leetle plan. And when ze police finally come, I wheel be long gone...wis ze Chap-el!”

“They’re going to set off a dirty bomb.”

“Yes, ze certain-lee wheel. In twen-tee minutes.”

“We’ll all be radioactive. People will die long protracted deaths and give birth to three-headed children.”

“Not you, Monsieur Bar-rel. You and your femme will alreadee be dead. Running Bear, Hawk Eyes, take zees two to ze courtyarde and shoot zem. I don’t want blood on ze Michelangelo. Adieu, Bar-rel.”

“This isn’t over! You won’t get away with this, Ferdi.”

“Ah, Todd. But I alreadee have.”

Running Bear and Hawk Eyes prodded us out into the courtyard. The sunlight hurt my eyes and things didn’t look good. Running Bear raised his rifle. I had some last words with Maria.

“We’ve had a good run, Maria. I thought we’d have many more miles of flesh to traverse before coming to this, but so the cookie crumbles.”

“You’ve shown me pleasure that I previously thought was unattainable. You changed me. You gave me new life. I will die a happy woman.”

“Cool.”

Before Running Bear could pull the trigger, a laser beam from the sky shot down and engulfed him in flames. Another soon followed and reduced Hawk Eyes to smoldering ash. Chiachfeld! I knew my man was watching from the Mir—Reagan’s Star Wars program was finally getting some results.

“Maria, let’s diffuse this bomb and kick some French ass.”

“Audentes fortuna iuvat.”

“Huh?”

“Fortune favors the brave.”

“Carpe Canuck Terroristas, Maria. Let’s roll.”

We double timed it over to the elevator and hit the last button, labeled SPS (St. Placentia Sepulcre). It took us forever to make it down to the tomb. The elevator music was some Gregorian chant that drove me bonkers. When the elevator doors opened, we saw two Quebecois terrorists playing bocce ball with saints’ skulls stolen from the tombs. We caught them by surprise and let them have it.

Maria picked up the skull of what looked to be Saint Elmo and slammed it into one the Canadians’ faces. She then put him in a headlock and snapped his neck like a faggy little twig. I delivered my signature flying double roundhouse kick to the other and turned the terrorist’s wan visage into pizza pie. The Italian shoes I had purchased for the O-Dei’s were serving me well with all my kicking. Finally, I held his body over my head and threw him headlong into an open marble casket. Maria and I pushed the heavy marble cover and closed it up. Buried alive six stories underneath the Vatican.

We found the bomb behind a pile of bones in the back. It was a ramshackle, Franco-rigged piece of weaponry that any self-respecting seventh grader could easily make. Nonetheless, it worked. An egg timer ticked away. Thirty seconds left.

“We’ve got all the time in the world, Maria. Thirty seconds of it.”

“Todd, sprinkle the anti-radiation dust on the bomb.”

“I don’t have it. I thought you had it.”

“I don’t have it! I thought you had it!”

“I thought you had it!!”

“I thought you had it!!!”

“I thought you had it!!!!”

“We’re going to die!!!”

“Maria, calm down. I was just joking. I have it right here.”

“You toy with my emotions, Todd.”

“I’ll toy with more than that, baby.”

I opened the metal container housing the radioactive Francium. It smelled like Diet Dr. Pepper. I poured the two grams of Dr. Tartikoff’s anti-radiation dust into the Francium solution and stirred until

a frothy consistency was achieved. Nothing was happening. Ten seconds. Five, four, three, two...all of sudden the mixture congealed into a rotten banana-like pudding. The buzzer went off. No detonation. Rome was saved.

Maria put her hands down my pants and readied me for a celebratory BJ. But it wasn't over yet.

“I'll take a rain check on that fellatio. There's a certain Frenchman that needs a super-sized American ass whooping.”

“Whoop on, Todd Barrel.”

“Maria, how do you think Ferdi got out? The place is surrounded by police.”

“Well, there's a secret tunnel that runs from the Vatican Museum to Castel San Angelo on the banks of the Tiber. Popes have used it to escape attacking armies and coup attempts. John Paul supposedly built a rail system with speed trains.”

“That's how they're transporting the Chapel. Sending it down the rail and onto a barge in the river. Tits! That man is ingenious.”

Maria and I arrived at the mouth of the subterranean train station. The last cargo load left as we got there. There were no more train cars left except an old flat bed with no brakes. It would have to do. Maria piled on and I gave a running push. The flat bed quickly built up speed and soon we were surfing the Vatican escape rails. A small pin point of light became bigger as we neared the exit. The flat bed hit the end of the rails and catapulted us out onto the dock. The barge with the Chapel had just pushed off. Ferdinand stood solo with a very proud look on his squirrely French face.

“Late to the party, Monsieur Bar-rel. Ze barge ees gone.”

“Ze asshole is here, Baguette. It's time to do something I should have done a long time ago.”

“You wish to—how do you Americans say—rumble?”

“Yeah, I wish to rumble. Gentleman's rules.”

“As you wish.”

Maria took my coat. I rolled up my sleeves. Ferdi did the same and we both fingered our knives, circling each other and sizing up one another. He charged and took a swipe. I dodged and spit in his eye. Ferdi took out a polka dotted silk handkerchief and dabbed his dishonored baby blue.

When he regained his stance, I lowered down and swept his legs with my Italian shoes. The moment he hit the ground, I kicked him in the balls like a Manchester United midfielder. His eyes rolled in the back of his head and sweat poured out of him. He gasped and whispered some barely audible words.

“Gentleman's...rules.”

“You, sir—are no gentleman. And I'm not either, for that matter. That's Euro pussy horseshit. I'm American made and duty-free, bitch.”

Ferdinand mustered up all his energy and lunged toward my foot, stabbing through the finely crafted leather and lodging his blade deep in my hoof. The pain was excruciating.

“Mother fucking Mary Lord Jesus!”

“You are just like your father's Cracker Barrel cheese product—flimsy, eminently forgettable and weak.”

“Time to break off a piece of Baguette.”

I pulled the knife from my foot, grabbed Ferdi by the scalp and gave him a haircut he’ll never forget. The pain sent him into shock and he passed out as the police arrived. Maria and I locked bodies, my hand making its way down to her sweet Colombian ass.

“God’s work is done, Todd.”

“Todd’s work is just beginning, Maria.”

“Do we ride off into the sunset now?”

“I ride you ‘till the bells of St. Peter command me to dismount.”

“I’m yours.”

“I know.”

V.

The authorities were pleased with us for saving Rome from radioactive infection but a little miffed for driving that space shuttle into the Basilica. The Pope was a good sport and lent Maria and me the Papal apartment for a week of connubial bliss. All I know is that they had to boil the sheets after our seven-day romp.

The whole Sistine Chapel art heist was foiled but kept very hush, hush and out of the papers. Ferdinand was locked away deep underneath the Vatican in a maximum-security detention center where they employed him in art forgery, another nice revenue stream for the Pope.

I never did receive the \$200K from Opus Dei and it continues to be a sore subject for me. Old Bishoff took pity and covered my hotel bill and took Maria and me out on the town for one last night. We laid together naked underneath the stars on the Café Caligula rooftop Jacuzzi deck. Oiled up chamber maids served us quail stuffed in beaver stuffed in antelope stuffed in rhino. Maria broke the silence.

“I got my orders today, Todd.”

“We both knew this day would come, Maria. I’m just glad I came first.”

“They’re sending me to Sri Lanka. There’s a conspiracy —”

“Say no more, my lovely assassin. We’ll meet again someday.”

“On the battlefield or in the bedroom.”

“Just make sure you’re on the right side of the Barrel.”

“Adios, muchacho.”

“Adios, Maria.”