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JACK SCHMIDT, ARTS ADMINISTRATOR

IT was one of those sweltering days toward the end of the fiscal year when Minneapolis smells of melting asphalt and foundation money is as tight as a rusted nut. Ninety-six, the radio said on the way in from the airport, and back at my office in the Acme Building I was trying to fan the memory of ocean breezes in Hawaii, where I had just spent two days attending a conference on Midwestern regionalism.

It wasn't working. I was sitting down, jacket off, feet up, looking at the business end of an air-conditioner, and a numb spot was forming around my left ear to which I was holding a telephone and listening to Bobby Jo, my secretary at the Twin Cities Arts Mall, four blocks away, reading little red numerals off a sheet of paper. We had only two days before the books snapped shut, and our administrative budget had sprung a deficit big enough to drive a car through—a car full of accountants. I could feel the deficit spreading a dark sweat stain across the back of my best blue shirt.

"Listen," I sputtered, "I still got some loose bucks in the publicity budget. Let's transfer that to administration."

"J. S.," she sighed, "I just got done telling you. Those loose bucks are as spent as an octogenarian after an all-

night bender. Right now, we're using more red ink than the funny papers, and yesterday we bounced three checks right off the bottom of the account. That budget is so unbalanced, it's liable to go out and shoot somebody."

You could've knocked me over with a rock.

"Sweetheart," I lied quietly, hoping she couldn't hear my heavy breathing, "don't worry about it. Old Jack has been around the block once or twice. I'll straighten it out."

"Payday is tomorrow," she replied sharply. "Twelve noon."

THE Arts Mall is just one of thirty-seven arts organizations I administer, a chain that stretches from the Anaheim Puppet Theatre to the Title IX Poetry Center in Bangor, and I could have let it go down the tubes, but hell, I kind of like the joint. It's an old National Tea supermarket that we renovated in 1976, when Bicentennial money was wandering around like helpless buffalo, and it houses seventeen little shops—mainly pottery and macrame, plus a dulcimer-maker, a printmaker, a spatter painter, two sculptors, and a watering hole called The Barre. This is one of those quiet little joints where you aren't driven crazy by the constant ring-

ing of cash registers. A nice place to drink but you wouldn't want to own it.

I hung up the phone and sat for a few minutes eyeballing an old nine-by-twelve glossy of myself, trying to get inspired. It's not a bad likeness. Blue pin-striped suit, a headful of hair, and I'm looking straight into 1965 like I owned it, and as for my line of work, anyone who has read "The Blonde in 204," "Close Before Striking," "The Big Tipper," and "The Mark of a Heel" knows that I'm not big on ballet.

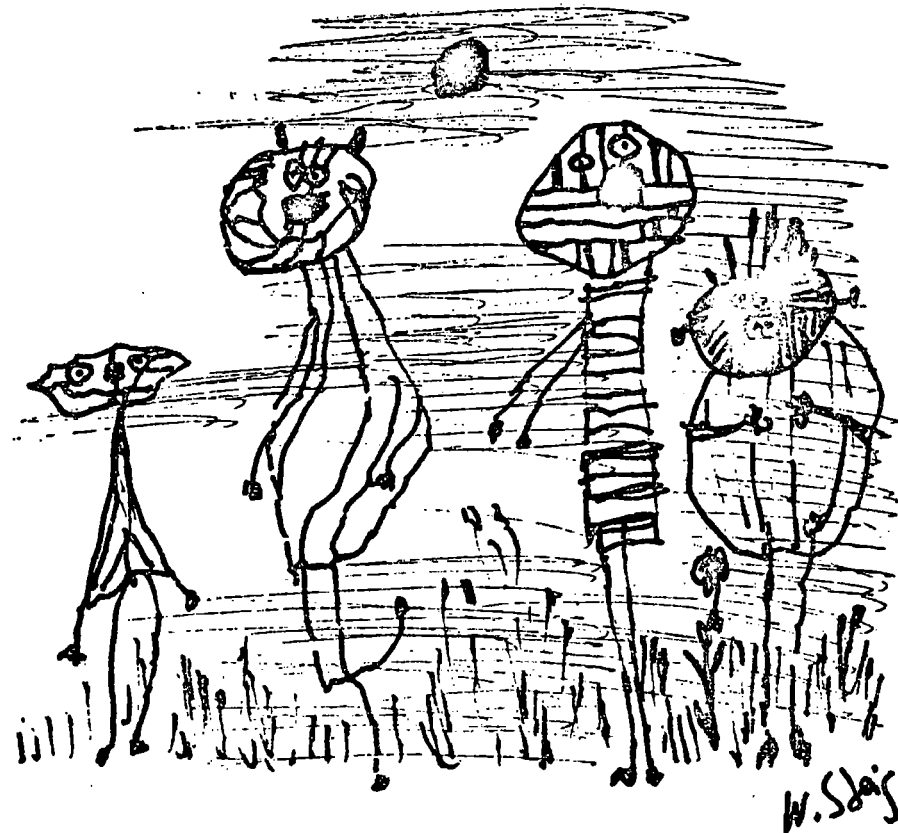
I wasn't real smart at spotting trends, either. The private-eye business was scraping bottom. I spent my days supporting a bookie and my nights tailing guys who weren't going anywhere anyway. My old pals at Jimmy's were trading in their wingtips and porkpie hats for Frye boots and Greek fisherman caps and growing big puffs of hair around their ears. Mine was the only suit that looked slept-in. I felt like writing to the Famous Shamus School and asking what I was doing wrong.

"It's escapism, Mr. Schmidt," quavered Ollie, the elevator boy, one morning when I complained that nobody needed a snoop anymore. "I was reading in the *Gazette* this morning where they say this is an age of anti-intellectualism. A sleuth like yourself, now, you represent the spirit of inquiry, the scientific mind, eighteenth-century enlightenment, but heck, people don't care about knowing the truth anymore. They just want to have *experiences*."

"Thanks for the tip, Ollie," I smiled, flipping him a quarter. "And keep your eyes open."

I was having an experience myself at the time and her name was Trixie, an auburn-haired beauty who moved grown men to lie down in her path and wave their arms and legs. I was no stronger than the rest, and when she let it be known one day that the acting studio where she studied nights was low on cash and might have to close and thus frustrate her career, I didn't ask her to type it in triplicate. I got the dough. I learned then and there that true artists are sensitive about money. Trixie took the bundle and the next day she moved in with a sandal-maker. She said I wasn't her type. Too materialistic.

Evidently I was just the type that every art studio, mime troupe, print gallery, folk-ballet company, and wind ensemble in town was looking for, though, and the word got around fast:



4-30-79

In the Weeds

Jack Schmidt knows how to dial a telephone and make big checks arrive in the mail. Pretty soon my outer office was full of people with long delicate fingers, waiting to tell me what marvellous, marvellous things they could do if only they had ten thousand dollars (minus my percentage). It didn't take me long to learn the rules—about twenty minutes. First rule: ten thousand is peanuts. Pocket money. Any arts group that doesn't need a hundred grand and need it *now* just isn't thinking hard enough.

My first big hit was a National Endowment for the Arts grant for a walkup tap school run by a dishwasher blonde named Bonnie Marie Beebe. She also taught baton, but we stressed tap on the application. We called the school The American Conservatory of Jazz Dance. A hundred and fifty thousand clams. "Seed money" they called it, but it was good crisp lettuce to me.

I got the Guild of Younger Poets fifty thousand from the Teamsters to produce some odes to the open road, and another fifteen from a lumber tycoon with a yen for haiku. I got a yearlong folk-arts residency for a guy who told Scandinavian jokes, and I found wealthy backers for a play called "Struck by Lightning," by a non-literalist playwright who didn't write a script but only spoke with the director a few times on the phone.

Nobody was too weird for Jack Schmidt. In every case, I had met weirder on the street. The Minnesota Anti-Dance Ensemble, for example, is a bunch of sweet kids. They simply don't believe in performance. They say that "audience" is a passive concept, and they spend a lot of time picketing large corporations in protest against the money that has been given to them, which they say comes from illicit profits. It doesn't make my life easier, but heck, I was young once, too. Give me a choice, I'll take a radical dance group over a Renaissance-music ensemble any day. Your average shawm or sackbut player thinks the world owes him a goddam living.

So I was off the pavement and into the arts, and one day Bobby Jo walked in, fresh out of St. Cloud State Normal and looking for money to teach interior decorating to minority kids, and she saw I needed her more. She threw out my electric fan and the file cabinet with the half-empty fifth in the third drawer and brought in some Mondrian prints and a glass-topped desk and about forty potted plants. She took



"Look, Finnegan. The great meals you've had are no greater than the great meals we've had."

away my .38 and made me switch to filter cigarettes and had stationery printed up that looks like it's recycled from beaten eggs. "Arts Consultant," it says, but what I sell is the same old hustle and muscle, which was a new commodity on the arts scene then.

"What your arts organizations need is a guy who can ask people for large amounts without blushing and twisting his hankie," I told her one day, en route to Las Palmas for a three-day seminar on the role of the arts in rural America. "Your typical general manager of an arts organization today is nothing but a bagman. He figures all he has to do is pass the hat at the board meeting and the Throttlebottoms will pick up the deficit. The rest of the time he just stands around at lawn parties and says witty things. But the arts are changing, Bobby Jo. Nowadays, everybody wants arts, not just the rich. It's big business. Operating budgets are going right through the ceiling. All of a sudden, Mr. Arts Guy finds the game has changed. Now he has to work for the money and hit up corporations and think box office and dive in and fight for a slice of the government pie, and it scares him right out of his silk jam-

mies. That's when he calls for Schmidt."

She slipped her hand into mine. I didn't take her pulse or anything, but I could tell she was excited by the way her breath came in quick little gasps.

"Now anyone who can spell 'innovative' can apply for a grant, government or otherwise," I went on, "but that doesn't mean that the bozo who reads the application is necessarily going to bust into tears and run right down to Western Union. He needs some extra incentive. He needs to know that this is no idle request for funds typed up by somebody who happened to find a blank application form at the post office. He needs to know that you are counting on the cash, that you fully expect to get it, and that if you are denied you are capable of putting his fingers in a toaster. The arts are growing, Bobby Jo, and you and me are going to make it happen."

"You're a visionary, J.S.," she murmured. "You have a tremendous overall concept but you need a hand when it comes to the day-to-day."

"Speaking of ideas," I muttered hoarsely, and I pulled the lap blanket up over our heads. She whispered my initials over and over in a litany of pas-

Three weeks now and the fog still clings to the white bell tower of this dull brown quarter stuck in a deaf-and-dumb corner of the Northern Adriatic. Electric lights go on burning in the tavern at noon. Deep-fried yellow tints the pavement flagstone. Cars at a standstill fade out of view without starting their engines. And the end of a sign's not quite legible. Now it isn't dampness that seeps through the ochre and terra-cotta but terra-cotta and ochre that seep through the dampness.

Shadow draws sustenance from the light and responds with Christian rejoicing as a coat is taken down from its nail. Shutters have spread their wings like angels plunged headfirst into someone else's squabbles. Here and there scab-encrusted stucco peels off, exposing inflamed red bricks, and skivvies, drying for three weeks, have gotten so attached to the open air and their line that if someone goes outdoors it's with nothing on under his jacket, barefooted in his slippers.

Two in the afternoon. A postman's silhouette takes on sharp definition in a hallway only to become an instant later a silhouette again. A bell, as it tolls in the fog, merely repeats the procedure.

So you automatically glance around in your own direction—like a random stroller trying for a better look at a pretty girl's ankles as she rustles past—but you can't see a thing except scraps of fog. No wind; only stillness. Indirection. Around a bend streetlamps trail off like white ellipses, followed by nothing but a smell of seaweed and the outline of a pier. No wind. And stillness like the whinny of Victor Emmanuel's never faltering cast-iron mare.

II

In winter, dusk, as a rule, comes too early—somewhere external, out there, up above. Tightly swaddled in tattered gauze, the hands of the town clock lag behind the scattered daylight fading in the distance. A lodger out for some cigarettes ten minutes later returns to his room via the tunnel his own body has burrowed through the fog. The continuous drone of an unseen airplane conjures up the hum of a vacuum at the far end of a hotel corridor, then dies away, blotting up the light. "Nebbia," yawns the weatherman; momentarily, eyelids close like a clam when a fish swims by (with the pupil briefly descending into its mother-of-pearl darkness). A light bulb framed by an archway looks like a youngster absorbed in his reading under the covers; the covers are gathered,

sion. I grabbed her so hard her ribs squeaked.

IT was a rough morning. After Bobby Jo's phone call, I got another from the Lawston Foundry, informing me that Stan Lewandowski's sculpture, "Oppresso," would not be cast in time for the opening of the Minot Performing Arts Center. The foundry workers, after hearing what Lewandowski was being paid for creating what looked to them like a large gerbil cage, went out on strike, bringing the sculpture to a standstill. I wasted fifteen minutes trying to make a lunch date with Hugo Groveland, the mining heir, to discuss the Arts Mall. He was going away for a while, Groveland said, and didn't know when he'd be back, if ever. He hinted at dark personal tragedies that were haunting him and suggested I call his mother. "She's more your type," he said, "plus she's about to kick off, if you know what I mean."

On top of it, I got a call from the director of our dinner theatre in upstate Indiana. He had been irked at me for

weeks since I put the kibosh on "Hedda Gabler." He had been plumping for a repertory theatre. "Fine," I said. "As long as you make it 'Fiddler on the Roof,' 'The Sunshine Boys,' and 'Man of La Mancha.'" Now he was accusing us of lacking a commitment to new writers. He said I was in the business of exploiting talent, not developing it.

"Listen, pal," I snarled. "As a director, you'd have a hard time getting people to act normal. So don't worry about me exploiting your talent. Just make sure you have as many people in the cast as there are parts. And tell your kitchen to slice the roast beef thin."

So he quit. I wished I could, too. I had a headache that wouldn't. And an Arts Mall with twenty-four hours to live.

"It's a whole trend called the New Naïveté," offered Ollie when I asked him why artists seemed to hate me, on the way down to lunch. "I was reading in the *Gazette* where they say people nowadays think simplicity is a prime virtue. They want to eliminate

the middleman. That's you, Mr. Schmidt. Traditionally, your role has been that of a buffer between the individual and a cruel world. But now people think the world is kind and good, if only they could deal with it directly. They think if they got rid of the middleman—the bureaucracy, whatever you want to call it—then everything would be hunky-dory."

"Thanks, Ollie," I said as the elevator doors opened. "Let's have lunch sometime."

It reminded me of something Bobby Jo had said in a taxicab in Rio, where we were attending a five-day conference on the need for a comprehensive system of evaluating arts information. "It's simple, J.S.," she said. "The problem is overhead. Your fat cats will give millions to build an arts center, but nobody wants to donate to pay the light bill because you can't put a plaque on it. They'll pay for Chippewa junk sculpture but who wants to endow the janitor?"

"Speaking of endowments," I whispered hoarsely, and I leaned over and

our-time, bounces off the rusty brick of the old basilica with a thump, as if a white leather ball had been slammed against it by schoolboys after school.

Shabby façades, chipped and pitted, with no option of standing in profile. Only the bare calves of curved balusters animating the tightly shuttered balconies on which no one—neither heiress nor governess—has emerged in two hundred years. Cornices chosen by monsters wedded in embrace or simply bored to death. Columns guttering like stearin, and the blind, agate splendor of impenetrable glass behind which lurk a couch and an upright piano: ancient secrets that are in fact best kept dark by daylight.

When the weather's cold, normal sound would rather bask in the warmth of a throat than risk echo's whimsey. A fish is tight-lipped; deep inland a turtledove sings its song. But you can't hear either one. A canal bridge spanning fresh water keeps the hazy bank on the other side from breaking away and drifting seaward. So then, on breath-coated glass, one can trace the initials of those whose absence is hard to swallow; and a cherished monogram trickles down as the tail of a sea horse. Apply that red sponge of your lungs and soak up the thick milky mist—the breath of Amphitrite and her Nereids! Stretch out a hand—and your fingertips will touch a torso that's flecked with tiny bubbles and scented with the iodine of childhood.

pressed my lips hungrily against hers. I could feel her earlobes trembling helplessly.

THE mining heir's mother lived in a mansion out on Mississippi Drive. The carpet in the hall was so deep it was like walking through a swamp. The woman who opened the door inspected me carefully for infectious diseases, then led me to a sitting room on the second floor that could've gone straight into the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. Mrs. Groveland sat in a wing chair by the fireplace. She looked pretty good for a woman who was about to make the far turn.

"Mr. Smith, how good of you to come," she tooted, offering me a tiny hand. I didn't correct her on the name. For a few grand, I'm willing to be called a lot worse. "Sit down and tell me about your arts center," she continued. "I'm all ears."

So were the two Dobermans who sat on either side of her chair. They looked as if they were trained to rip your throat if you used the wrong fork.

Usually, my pitch begins with a description of the long lines of art-starved inner-city children bused in daily to the Arts Mall to be broadened. But the hounds made me nervous—they maintained the most intense eye contact I had ever seen from floor level—so I skipped ahead to the money part. I dropped the figure of fifty thousand dollars.

She didn't blink, so I started talking about the Mall's long-range needs. I mentioned a hundred thou. She smiled as if I had asked for a drink of water.

I crossed my legs and forged straight ahead. "Mrs. Groveland," I radiated. "I hope you won't mind if I bring up the subject of estate planning."

"Of course not," she radiated right back. "The bulk of my estate, aside from the family bequests and a lump-sum gift to the Audubon Society, is going for the care of Luke and Mona here." At the word "estate," the Dobermans seemed to lick their chops.

I had to think fast. I wasn't about to bad-mouth our feathered friends of the forest, or Mrs. Groveland's family,

A swish of ruffles on the washed and ironed sheet of the bay and, for a moment, colorless air condenses into a pigeon or a seagull, but quickly dissipates. Dinghies, longboats, gondolas, flatbottoms, hauled from the water, lie scattered like odd shoes on the sand creaking underfoot. Remember:

any movement is basically a shift of body weight from one location to another. Remember: the past won't fit into memory without something left over; it must have a future. And remember carefully: only water, and it alone, everywhere and always stays true to itself, unsusceptible to metamorphoses, level, present wherever dry land is gone. And the inflation of living—with its beginning, middle, thinning calendar, end, et cetera—shrinks before colorless, shallow, eternal ripples.

The rigid, lifeless wire of a grapevine quivers imperceptibly with its own tension. Trees in the garden blackness, indistinguishable from a fence resembling someone without anything or, more important, anyone left to confess to.

Twilight. No wind. The stillness.

The crunch of coquina, the rustle of crushed, moldering reeds. A tin can launched skyward by the tip of a shoe goes sailing out of sight, and a minute later there is still no sound of it falling on wet sand. Or, for that matter, a splash.

—JOSEPH BRODSKY

(Translated, from the Russian, by Barry Rubin.)

either, but I thought I just might shake loose some of the dog trust. I told her about our Founders Club for contributors of fifty thousand or more. Perhaps she could obtain *two* Founderships—one for each Doberman. "Perhaps it would take a load off your mind if you would let us provide for Luke and Mona," I said. "We could act as their trustees. We just happen to have this lovely Founders Club Kennel, way out in the country, where—"

At the mention of a kennel, the beasts lowered their heads and growled. Their eyes never left my face.

"Hush, hush," Mrs. Groveland scolded gently. "Don't worry," she assured me, "they don't bite. Well, hardly ever."

They may not bite, I thought, but they can sue.

Then Mona barked. Instantly, I was on my feet, but the dogs beat me to it. The sounds that came from their throats were noises that predated the Lascaux cave paintings. They were the cries of ancient Doberman souls trying to break through the thin crust

ready to pay top dollar, plus—you won't believe this—to sweeten the deal, they're throwing in 6.2 miles of Interstate 594."

"Miles of what?" Then it clicked. "You mean that unfinished leg of 594?" I choked.

"It's been sitting there for years. There are so many community groups opposed to it that the Highways Department doesn't dare cut the grass that's growing on it. They want us to take them off the hook. And if we make it an arts space, they figure it'll fulfill their beautification quota for the next three years."

"We'll call it The ArtsTrip!" I exclaimed. "Or The ArtStrip! The median as medium! Eight-lane environmental art! Big, big sculptures! Action painting! Wayside Dance Areas! Living poetry plaques! Milestones in American Music! Arts parks and Arts lots! A drive-in film series! The customized car as American genre! The customized van as Arts-mobile! People can have an arts experience without even pulling over onto the shoulder. They can get quality enrichment and still make good time!"

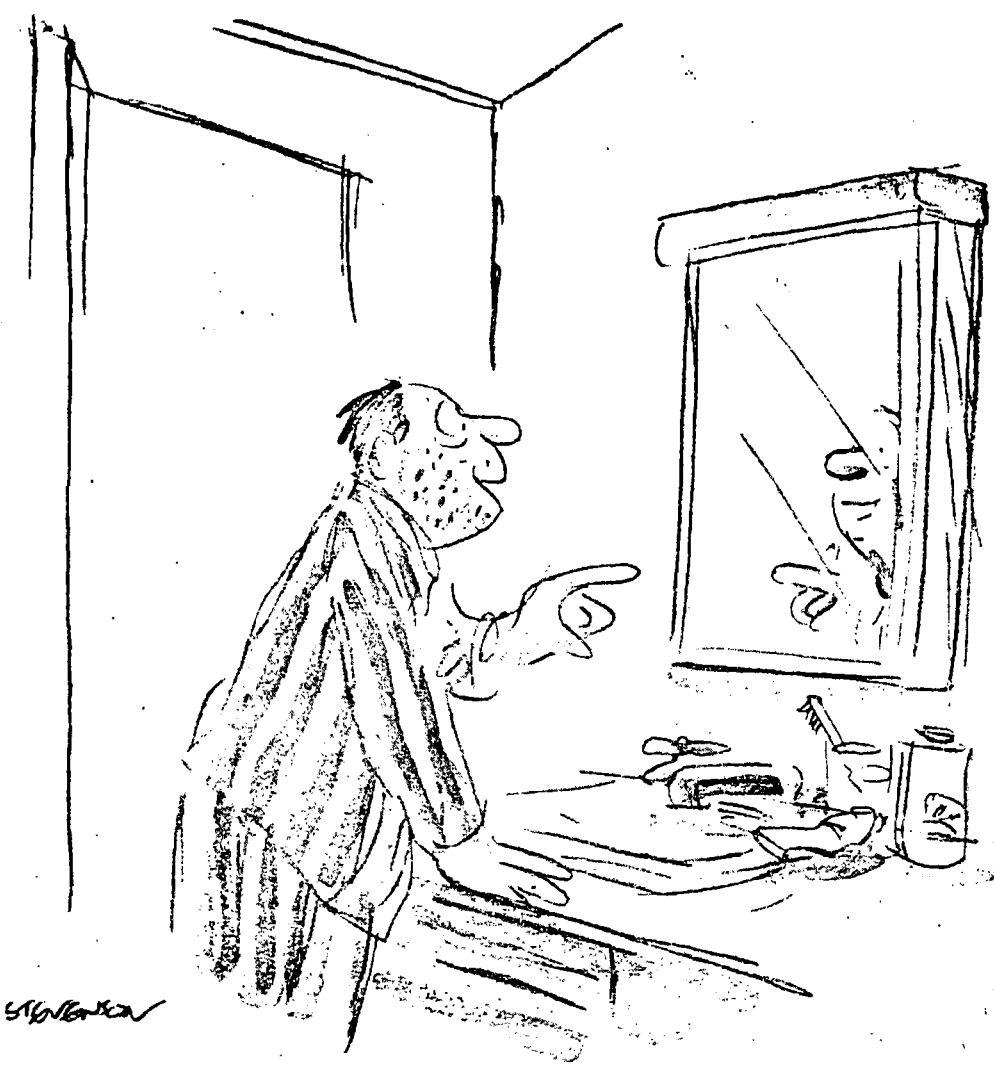
"Speaking of making time—" Her voice broke. She shuddered like a turned-on furnace. Her breath came in quick little gasps.

I don't know what's next for Jack Schmidt after the Arts Highway is finished, but, whatever it is, it's going to have Jack Schmidt's name on it. No more Mr. Anonymous for me. No more Gray Eminence trips for yours truly. A couple of days ago, I was sitting at my desk and I began fooling around with an inkpad. I started making thumbprints on a sheet of yellow paper and then I sort of smooshed them around a little, and one thing led to another, and when I got done with it I liked what I saw. It wasn't necessarily something I'd hang on a burlap wall with a baby ceiling spot aimed at it, but it had a certain *definite* quality that art could use a lot more of. I wouldn't be too surprised if in my next adventure I'm in a loft in SoHo solving something strictly visual while Bobby Jo throws me smoldering looks from her loom in the corner. In the meantime, good luck and stay out of dark alleys.

—GARRISON KEILLOR

But the book's strongest writing is about the satisfactions of surviving a hard winter: wooden stoves, good drink, a safe journey home made in a blizzard.—*Martha Duffy in Time.*

With a wooden stove, a good drink is the only answer.



"Not *the Ernest Dummerston*?"

of domestication, and they expressed a need that was far deeper than that of the Arts Mall, the arts in general, or any individual artist whom I would care to know. The next sound I heard was the slam of a panelled oak door closing. I was out in the hallway and I could hear Mrs. Groveland on the other side saying, "*Bad Luke, naughty Mona!*" The woman who had let me in let me out. "They're quite protective," she informed me, chuckling. If a jury had been there to see her face, I'd have altered it.

When I got back to the office, I gathered up every piece of correspondence in our National Arts Endowment file and threw it out the window. From above, it looked like a motorcade was due any minute. I was about to follow up with some of the potted plants when the phone rang. It rang sixteen times before I picked it up. Before Bobby Jo could identify herself, I'd used up all the best words I know. "I'm out," I added. "Through. Done. Kaput. Fini. The End. Cue the credits. I've had it."

"J.S.," she began, but I was having none of it.

"I've had a noseful of beating money out of bushes so a bunch of sniveling wimps can try the patience of tiny audiences of their pals and moms with subsidized garbage that nobody in his right mind would pay Monopoly money to see," I snapped. "I'm sick of people calling themselves artists who make pots that cut your fingers when you pick them up and wobble when you set them on a table. I'm tired of poets who dribble out little teeny poems in lower-case letters and I'm sick of painters who can't even draw an outline of their own hand and I'm finished with the mumblers and stumblers who tell you that if you don't understand them it's *your* fault."

I added a few more categories to my list, plus a couple dozen persons by name, several organizations, and a breed of dog.

"You all done, J.S.?" she asked. "Because I've got great news. The Highways Department is taking the Arts Mall for an interchange. They're