

THE TRAVELING

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of bizarro." —Carlton Melick III

DILDO

SALESMAN



WONDERLAND BOOK AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

KEVIN L. DONIHE

The Traveling

DiDo

SaleSman

also by Kevin I. Donihe

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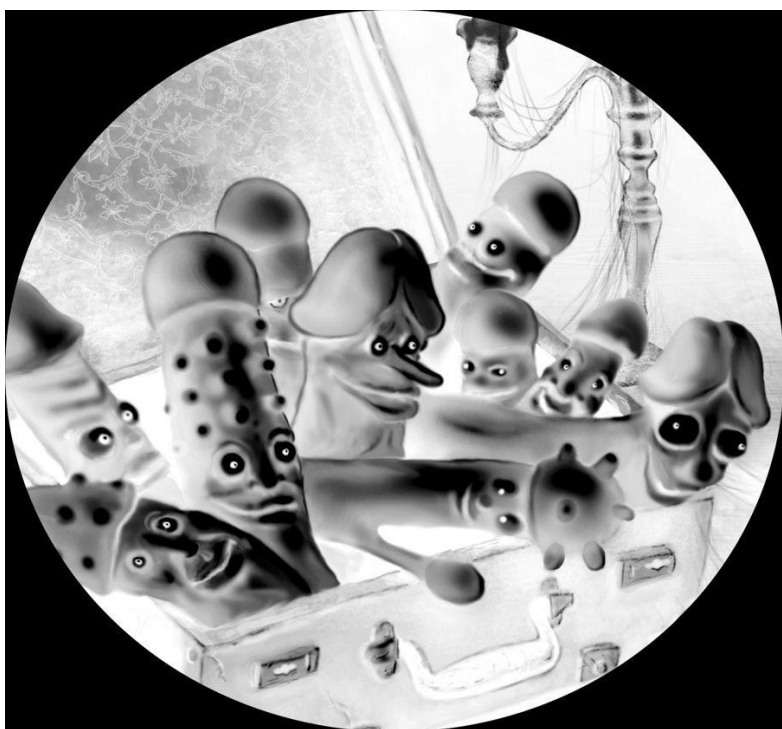
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Shall We Gather at the Garden?



The Traveling Dildo Salesman

Kevin I. Donihe

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ChooSe Your PleaSure

06

THE TRAVELING dILdO SALESMAN

Fetish: Dildos

52

MILky AGITATION

Fetish: Milk

56

TWO-WAY SANTA

Fetish: The Homeless

68

THE HELEN MOWER

Fetish: Lawnmowers

74

LIVING ROOM ZOMBIES

Fetish: The Undead

92

REVENGE OF THE LIVING MASTURBATION RAG

Fetish: Laser Roboto

The Traveling

DILdO

SaleSman

Chapter one

ralph was a traveling dildo salesman. His selection was vast, and all models were stamped MADE IN HEAVEN.

In truth, he wasn't sure if his name was ralph, but he thought of himself as Ralph, and, when he happened upon some reflective surface, he saw what he imagined to be a ralph looking back. It didn't matter if it was really bil or bob or Tom or Ted or Sam or Steve. It didn't matter if he didn't have a name at all.

All that mattered were the dildos and his ability to sell them.

Ultimately, he wanted to do and be something else, something new that felt old, like a thing he'd been before but somehow stopped being. The only way he could render the unknown known was to continue on the path, be diligent and pick up clues along the way. When the last dildo was sold, the time of wandering and wondering would end; all answers would be revealed.

This process was the one thing of which he was certain.

Ralph trod a flat, featureless road. The morning sun was red on his face, and the eye in the sky looked down at him, unblinking.

Unlike the sun, it never changed its position, just kept its big blue orb trained on him, day and night. He tried not to look at it very often. It gave him a weird sense of vertigo when he did, like he was about to fall into the eye, even though it was above him.

As he approached the start of yet another neighborhood, his case became heavier, as though ghost hands were loading it with bricks. The weight caused his left side to slump, so ralph tried dragging it on pavement.

All around him, houses were austere, old-looking abodes.

Kevin L. Donihe

That seemed to end in needle points, the uppermost stories too high to see. Most were painted white. Spacious yet empty wooden front porches jutted equidistantly from the road, and each yard featured at least one plastic animal sculpture.

Ralph wouldn't try them all. Most he would simply pass, as they weren't the right places. He always knew which were right.

He was, in a sense, told. Though the method of transmission was different each time, it was no less apparent.

Suddenly, his neck felt prickly. He turned left and regarded the property across from him. Here, the grass was longer than in the surrounding yards, and it blew back and forth, as if buffeted by gale-force winds. Seconds later, the blades froze into place, all bent towards the house.

He knocked on the selected door. A little girl, licking a lollipop as big as her face, opened it. Ralph wanted to take the lollipop from her, taste something sweet, but restrained himself and said, "Is your mother home?"

She just nodded.

"Wonderful! May I speak with her?"

Again, the girl nodded, and then scampered off.

Too much time seemed to pass. Ralph was beginning to think the girl had simply left when he heard two sets of approaching footsteps. Moments later, a young, harried-looking woman in a flour-coated apron stood before him, the girl by her side.

"Greetings, madam," ralph said. "I hate to trouble you, but you look like someone who might be interested in my line of products."

"I'm really kind of busy." She looked down. "Kids, you know..."

Ralph didn't, but nodded anyway.

"Though I imagine being a traveling salesman must be hard work, too."

Ralph smiled inwardly. "It is."

8

The Traveling Dildo Salesman

She regarded his case. "So, what are you selling?"

"Only the finest dildos. That's my answer, and my guarantee." Her face went slack. "The finest what?"

"Dildos, madam."

"Don't say that word!" She clutched the girl. "Can't you see a child is present?"

Ralph looked down at the girl, still licking the huge lollipop.

He waved, and she waved back.

"I hardly think it's inappropriate," he replied. "After all, my dill—items have a vast array of potential uses, and not just the common one, which you are no doubt considering." She scowled. "Tell me, how else does one use a d-i-l-l-o?"

"Well, for starters, many mothers buy them for their children to play with, or to fashion into mobiles for infants."

"That's ghastly! You're ghastly!"

"I assure you that's not the case. Kids simply love dildos, especially the colorful floppy ones." He caught his mistake.

"I'm terribly sorry, madam. I'll spell it out next time." She covered the girl's ears, began humming loudly. "I'm not listening to you!" she shouted between hums.

"Please, if you would just—"

The door slammed in his face. dejected, ralph looked down at his feet and saw a bunch of ants crawling in formation across the porch. Their bodies formed a note: AT THE NEXT

HOuSE, yOu WILL FInD A CLuE.

Ralph was flummoxed. Why couldn't the sign have been given there first?

back on the street, a massive billboard caught his attention.

IT'S THE GOvERNMENT, it said, the words superimposed over a bunch of happy looking people seated at a breakfast table, eating a bear-shaped cereal called Flang-Os. ralph made mental note of this revelation and kept walking until he saw 9

kevin L. donihe

something he never remembered seeing, at least not as a traveling dildo salesman.

He ran to the bus stop, plopped himself down on a weathered bench. If a bus was all he needed to escape, then so be it. To hell with selling dildos.

After a few minutes, he drummed fingers on his left leg, shook his right one. A little later, both legs shook, and, after what had to be almost thirty minutes, he chewed on his bottom lip until it bled. Maybe it was an abandoned stop. Maybe there never was a bus.

And then he saw it, first as just a speck on the horizon that could be anything, and then as a big red double-decker. It pulled up, ground to a halt. The door opened, and the oddly familiar driver regarded him.

ralph grabbed his case, arose.

"Slow down there," said the driver.

"I'm sorry. I'll go slower. I'm just in a—"

"No, no, no. you misunderstand. I'm not telling you to board at a slower and therefore safer pace." ralph looked at him askance. "you're not?"

"No, I'm telling you not to board at all."

Hope sank. "What?"

"you heard me."

"but why? Can't I just get on? Please."

The driver seemed perturbed. "Not with that case," he said.

ralph clutched the handle tighter. "you don't understand; I need it! If I lose it, I'll get in big trouble!"

"Are you sure about that?"

Ralph wasn't sure, at least not exactly. Still, he figured it best to err on the side of caution.

"you know I can't take any riders with cases," the driver continued, "and yet here you are, day after day, asking if you can board."

"I do that?"

"yes."

10

The Traveling dildo Salesman

He didn't want to let on any further that he didn't recall his last attempts. "Well, uh, I figure if I keep trying, maybe you'll change your mind and let me on."

"That's not going to happen, ralph."

He was shocked. "How do you know my name?"

The driver smiled. "you've told me a few times." Somewhere in the back, a passenger asked a muffled question. When the driver finished and turned again towards ralph, he said, "Try again tomorrow."

"but you'll say the same thing then!"

The driver cocked his neck, raised a brow. "And how do you know that?"

He had a point.

The door closed and the bus shot up into the sky, traveling, it seemed, to the big unblinking eye.

11

Chapter Two

Twenty minutes after leaving the stop, ralph found the second sign, the sun shinning so brightly upon a house that his view of it was all but obscured. Once the light dimmed, he saw the place and wished he could go elsewhere.

Gravestones jutted from the unkempt yard's left corner, near a rickety, weather-beaten fence and just across from a red-eyed plastic donkey. One stone was crossed-shaped, though an arm had broken off. The next had been sculpted to resemble a fat tree stump, a cut branch protruding from center-left. The last one—slate and seemingly the oldest—showcased a bas-relief of a grinning skull framed by garlands. Moss made it seem as though the skull had a mouthful of green teeth.

Unconsciously, Ralph scratched his front tooth with a finger-nail. He looked up from the graves. An image in a dark window seemed to be a scowling face, forehead scrunched and lips twisted in some disagreeable way. Still, he couldn't be sure if it was someone behind the glass or an old picture on the wal inside.

ralph swallowed apprehension. Time to buck up. Time to accost the potential customer within.

He gripped the case and dragged it across the yard, ripping up grass. The red-eyed plastic donkey now faced him instead of the road. ralph averted his gaze quickly.

He paused at the door. The selling spiel didn't come naturally to him, not even with the easiest or most pliable customers.

Saying the words made him feel artificial, like a collection of gears and cogs.

Just then, the dildos started to awaken. He heard their soft, sleepy murmurs, muffled by leather.

"Ssssh," he said. "relax."

12

The Traveling dildo Salesman

A dildo made a thumping sound. ralph interpreted this as an act of defiance.

"be nice today! don't be assholes!"

Another thump. Then a third one, louder still.

"I said, don't be assholes!"

The dildos ceased flopping, but Ralph still heard them murmur to one another. He couldn't understand their language, but imagined they were saying bad things about him and his abilities as a salesman.

ralph shook his head, rolled his shoulders a few times and knocked on the door, the noise echoing through the interior, over and over again, then boomeranging back to him and resulting in sounds somehow louder than the original knocks.

Eventually, six knocks sounded like six thousand.

A seventh knock wasn't necessary. The door creaked open.

Just past the threshold stood an old woman, face like yellow parchment. Her hair, dyed unnaturally black, stood a foot above her scalp. She wore a stern black dress beneath a shawl that covered her back and shoulders like a web. She didn't seem to have feet, but they had to be somewhere beneath the dress.

No sooner than ralph introduced himself did smoke start to rise from around her neck, like hundreds of tiny men inside her tall lace collar were smoking cigars. He tried to ignore this and begin his spiel.

"Hello, good lady. My name is ralph and I'm a traveling dildo salesman." He paused then, waiting to see if the woman might introduce herself or extend a withered hand to be kissed, but she said and did nothing. Thin, bloodless lips remained tightly pursed. She didn't even blink.

ralph continued. "Now, you might be thinking that such things don't interest you, but I'm here to tell you that dildos are, in fact, one of the most versatile consumer items known to Man. If you'd only—"

He stopped. The amount of smoke pouring from her collar increased. ralph could barely see her. It was awkward, 13

kevin L. donihe

just standing on the porch, saying nothing, but he didn't think it wise to continue the spiel when the lady wasn't visible.

before the smoke could clear, dildos started muttering again. He looked down at the case. "Shut up, you dildos!" he said through clenched teeth. "I'm in the middle of a sale!" ralph regained his composure and turned again to the old woman. The smoke had cleared a bit, but she displayed no sign of life other than standing. "Please, forgive the out-burst," he said. "Let me just show you, my good lady, what I have to offer."

He opened up the case. His face scrunched in horror. The case brimmed with angry, violent dildos the likes of which he hadn't anticipated. They flopped around like dozens of dying fish, all screaming for water.

He made to close the case. A dildo shot from the opposite end to his fingers. Small yet razor-sharp teeth sank into his thumb.

He dropped the case, and the dildo that bit him scampered off, laughing. He'd never realized a dildo was capable of laughter.

"Excuse me, would you please? This won't take a moment."

The old woman made no response other than continued smoking. ralph turned from her and saw that the dildo had inched to the cemetery. There, it darted about the graves and coiled around stones. He had to rectify the situation. Not one could be allowed to escape, as a free dildo could never be sold.

ralph sprinted to the little cemetery. Pausing there, he watched the dildo writhe in overgrown grass and moss, seemingly blissful until it turned to him and hissed.

He tried to pounce on the thing, but missed and almost cracked his head on a tombstone. No matter. He had to teach the dildo a lesson. reaching out, ralph seized the thing as it curved around the stump-shaped stone. It bared its teeth; bit him again.

The Traveling dildo Salesman

"you son of a bitch!" he shouted.

It squirmed in his grasp. ralph barely maintained his hold.

He heard the bray of a donkey, was distracted, and the thing slipped free, scurried up his shirt and wrapped itself around his neck.

Sparks started to fly, and then the world itself seemed to darken. Tighter and tighter the thing squeezed. ralph tried, but couldn't get his hands between the dildo and his throat. Falling away, his hands flopped, brushed against a stick. He grabbed it. The dildo shrieked as the stick penetrated its middle. uncoiling from his neck, it thrashed on the ground, injured, a blue goopy substance bubbling from the hole ralph had made.

Gripping what he imagined must be the dildo's throat, he squeezed. "do you like how that feels?" he shouted. "do you?"

The dildo could not respond. blue plastic took on a pink tint before becoming a brilliant, swollen red. It went limp in his hand, and ralph threw its twisted remains against a nearby tree, just for good measure.

Turning back to the house, he noticed that the old smoking lady had gone, and that the other dildos were inching out of their case and creeping out onto the lawn.

reclaiming the dead dildo, ralph ran up to the others and brandished the corpse in front of them. "if any of you assholes move, I'll do the same to you, and I won't hesitate!

do you understand? I'll kill each and every last one of you, no matter how long it takes!"

The dildos stopped flopping on the porch or in the grass, got in line and returned to the case. They seemed cowed and most quieted down, some whimpering like good little sex toys as they took their positions, one atop the other. But a defiant, devilish red dildo didn't get the message. It started flopping the other way.

ralph pressed the dead dildo against the living one. "No, 15

kevin L. donihe

don't even think about trying that!"

It quieted down, and ralph threw the dead dildo in with the living ones. Most recoiled in horror, not at all eager to share close quarters with a deceased comrade. ralph didn't imagine this would pose a problem, at least not for him. He just wouldn't let potential consumer know that the product was deceased. All sales, after all, were final.

He closed the case. Then he knocked on the door a few times, waited, but no one answered.

ralph hadn't been back on the road for more than a minute when he saw another sign, every cloud in the sky suddenly amassing around a single house. It was hard to remember, but, in the past, it seemed that he had to walk quite a bit, sometimes for miles and miles, before he reached another selected property. Maybe whatever the other house had to offer had been transferred to this one. ralph hoped that was the case.

In the yard, a plastic grizzly bear with claws outstretched towered over a birdbath. Its lips: curled in a sneer. A trail of white plastic drool streamed down from a single tooth. The bear had to be at least twelve feet tall. ralph kept his eye on it as he passed.

A sheet of paper was taped to the front door. The letters were rendered in pencil, words so small he was already on the porch before he could read them.

NO FuCkING SALESMEN, PLEASE, they said.

ralph wanted to respect this homeowner's wishes. He wanted to turn around, go someplace else. Still, he had to try.

The sign had been given.

He only had to knock once. In seconds, he heard approaching footsteps, big clomping ones. The door opened with a squeal.

"What do you want?" said the man, a grizzled, but stout, forty-something. His tousled hair made it seem as though he'd 16

The Traveling dildo Salesman

just gotten out of bed. Stubble coated his cheeks. He wore an open bathrobe. beneath it, only briefs.

More disconcerting: a bandage of what appeared to be freshly wrought tiger skin. It covered one eye, most of his forehead and left cheek. ralph hated the sight of blood, and his mind conjured up images of what might lay below the strange bandage, even as he launched into his spiel.

"Hello, sir! My name is ralph, and—"

The man didn't let him finish. "Are you a salesman?" he said. It hadn't sounded like a question. "ummm, I, uhhhh..."

"Are you or aren't you?"

"I am, sir."

He folded his arms across his chest. "I don't much like salesmen."

"don't worry," ralph replied, trying not to stare at the tiger bandage. "I'm not one of those regular guys! I'm a traveling dildo salesman!"

The man seemed neither interested nor impressed. His face reddened and scrunched into a scowl similar to that of the face ralph had seen in the window.

"but I have all the best models, exclusive ones, and I only come by once. If you miss this opportunity, it's gone forever." The man's expression didn't waver. A fat forehead vein pulsed, tenting out his bandage. "I'm a guy. What need do I have for dildos? Where am I going to stick them? up my ass?" "If you want, yes."

The vein thumped harder. "I don't very much appreciate the kind of people who do that!"

Clearly, this guy would be a hard sell. Perhaps another approach was in order. ralph thought for a second, began:

"The thing about my dildos is that they're not only practical.

They're aesthetic, too."

"What the hell are you talking about?" The bandage started 17

kevin L. donihe

to slump. "Those are sex toys, sick and perverted!" ralph swallowed hard. His hands quaked, but he had to continue. "They'll look simply lovely atop a mantle, or by a light or candle, should you choose a translucent model." He ducked a blood spurt from the man's forehead. "Can you imagine having such an amazing and versatile item to show your guests?"

"The pulp of your face wrapped around my fists! That's what I can imagine!"

ralph dropped the case, lifted his hands defensively.

"I'm—I'm sorry, but I had no choice! I had to come here! The grass told me so!"

"Are you on drugs?" His face was mere inches from ralph's. The tiger bandage fell completely, exposing red meat and yellow pus. His left eye: a black raisin in his head. "Are you an addict?"

"No! No drugs! Not an addict!"

The man, now appearing as tall as the room, glared down at him. "Good! because there's nothing worse than an addict who's also a traveling salesman!"

blood rained down on ralph. "Please don't hurt me," he muttered.

"I posted a note," the man roared in response, and now his nose and ears were bleeding, too. "you can't say I didn't! I have to beat up every salesman that comes to my door, see? It's a compulsion!"

before ralph could react, the man landed an uppercut to his jaw. ralph fell to the porch, and the man started kicking his ribs. The guy's bathrobe flapped back and forth. His penis bobbed up and down in tandem with the balls in his briefs.

ralph rolled off the porch into the grass. He arose quickly, his mouth and side aching, and saw the man bound towards him. "Let me finish what I started!" he screamed, every exposed part of his body alternating between shades of scarlet and 18

The Traveling dildo Salesman

crimson as it began to swell.

ralph look off towards the road. "I told you I was sorry!" he shouted, but the man, uninterested in apologizes, continued his pursuit.

His voice sounded clotted, deep and strained. "you are making me very, very mad!"

When ralph reached the bear, the man jumped out from behind it. ralph bit back a scream; he couldn't even wonder how he'd gotten there so fast. His body had expanded to four times its normal size. Eyes bulged like angry melons as red fountains gushed from thick, rope-like veins that throbbbed audibly.

The man cocked his grossly oversized fist. Instead of a fist, eyes hit Ralph as both popped out of the man's head. "Ah shit," he tried to say, but reached critical mass and exploded all over the yard instead.

The initial shock wore off; ralph felt around. His body was intact and, miraculously, none of the mess had splattered on him or his clothes. It was everywhere else, though, even on some of the other houses.

Then he realized the globs and splatters weren't just random. They spelled out a clue that began by a neighboring tree, stretched from the bear up to the front of the house, went over a fence and ended by a lamppost the next yard over.

dONT TruST bILLbOArDS, it said.

ralph recited these words a hundred times in an attempt to store them in long-term memory. Then he wondered if it really mattered. He remembered nothing specific from past clues, just disembodied references to various individuals, groups, cults and drugs. Perhaps the clues were all being stored in a mental vault of sorts, one that he could access at the correct time, but maybe that was mere wishful thinking.

And how long had it been since he sold a dildo? A year?

Ten years? A hundred?

Had he even sold a first one? All he remembered was going 19

kevin L. donihe

to many houses and knocking on many doors, so many that they all blurred together and seemed like the same big door that led into the same big house.

Maybe he just needed another sign, one that would lead him to a new house, a better place where he'd not only find a clue, but sel a dildo, too. To find it, he'd just have to keep walking.

And so ralph walked for longer than he thought he could without the sun going down.

Maybe he wanted it too much, or wasn't looking hard enough. Fear told him that it was his fault. He was too blind to see what had to be right in front of him. ralph tried to shake away this thought. It leached into him, instead.

"Come on! Just give me something I can recognize!" Looking up at the eye in the sky, he imagined that it was taunting him silently.

ralph considered breaking protocol by trying the closest house. Another part of him felt that this might be a bad thing, that he might be punished, somehow and by somebody.

He put the case down. It had become even more of an anathema to him. Stretching his arms and back, he felt something in his pocket press against his leg. He pulled out a cell phone.

Interesting, but he knew no one apart from himself.

Wait. He'd forgotten about Mom. Now, more than anything, he wanted to talk to her. She had been dead for a very long time, but that didn't stop her from being there for him, day after day.

Maybe she would have some answers, too, but ralph didn't recall her number. In desperation, he pushed random buttons on the pad. To his surprise, the phone on the other end started ringing. In three rings, it was picked up.

ralph said "hello" and heard only a lullaby, hummed in his mother's voice. Seconds before, he couldn't remember the 20

The Traveling dildo Salesman

sound of it. It seemed so warm and familiar now. vaguely, ralph recalled doing stuff with Mom when he was small, things like going to a place full of steel cages and vicious, wild animals.

Whenever he thought of her, she had a blank-face.

She finished the lullaby. "How are you doing, dear?"

"About the same ... at least I think so."

Her voice had a caring lilt. "And how exactly is that?" It seemed now that his mom always had a way of getting the truth out of him. He exhaled and spoke. "I went to a bad house and ... and I just don't want to do this shi—" he stopped himself before he could say a bad word—"anymore. I want to go back home, but to do that, I've got to keep knocking on these doors!"

"I understand. you're frustrated. but trust me, it's not as bad as you think."

He sighed. "I just want you to tell me something about how things used to be. Anything. It doesn't matter. Even the smallest detail will help me feel whole again." Silence greeted him for too long.

"... Like what school did I attend? What was my favorite color? Where did we live?"

"All those things are confidential, dear."

"Okay, Mom, okay. It's just that ... being dead and all, you must know some of the secrets."

"I do. but you know I can't tell." There was a slight pause.

"but I can tell you this..."

His hands tingled. "Please, Mom! Please tell!"

"This happened long ago. I was in the hospital with the flu.

doctors thought I might die, and I felt so terrible I believed them, until The White Man came."

"The White Man?"

"yes, and he told me that you, who had yet to be born, would grow up to become a very special type of man, a traveling dildo salesman."

"Why have you never told me this?"

21

kevin L. donihe

"I've told you. you just don't remember."

ralph looked down at his shoes. "Oh..."

"don't worry, Son. For now, simply know that you are meant to follow this path. It is your Way. do you understand?"

"yes, Mom, I do."

"Good. And never get on that bus. you'd be cheating destiny."

He was taken aback. "How did you know about the bus?"

"Mothers know all. I also know a sign will appear to you soon, and it will make you very, very happy." Suddenly, the pavement in front of him reared up. ralph covered his eyes, for a second thinking it might crash down on him like a wave, but it took a detour to the right, shooting through a nearby yard and across the porch where it stopped at the door and landed with a thud.

"do you see the sign?" Mom asked.

"I do. And yes, I'll do a good job. I'll sell all my dildos, just like you want. but Mom..."

"What, Son?"

He bit his lip. "Can I ask a favor before you go?"

"Of course."

"Will you ... will you please call me after I finish with this house, just in case it turns out bad, too?" He hated that he sounded so vulnerable.

"I'll try, but I can't make promises. Getting to the phone more than once a day when you're dead isn't easy."

"I understand, and no need to promise anything. Thanks, Mom."

"you're welcome, Son."

Following the new road, ralph scanned the chosen property.

Physically, the house was the same as all the others, but a fountain towered in the yard. rusting steel fragments of varying shapes and sizes shot forth at wild angles from a wide, saucer-22

The Traveling dildo Salesman

shaped base. The top ended in a huge nozzle that sputtered black, oily water. ralph wondered if the owner

might be an artist, someone who might appreciate his dildos, buy them all, and incorporate them into his or her work.

He stood at the door for a few seconds for composure's sake, but, before he could knock, the door opened slowly, not with a squeal, but a mechanical hum and the sound of uncoiling springs and grinding gears.

before ralph stood a robot, or, rather, what looked like a Halloween costume or cheap movie approximation of such. Its body was just a dull tin box with slots and knobs and gauges on it. Some appeared painted on. Its head was similar to a bucket, with a cutout slot for the mouth, two red plastic flares serving as eyes and a black dot for the nose. Legs were thick, woven wire bundles. The wires untangled and split into prongs that served as rudimentary feet; it didn't appear to have functional knees.

"Good day, sir."—Then he wondered if he should call a robot "sir"—"My name is ralph, and you look like an individual who might be interested in one of my fine dildos." The robot made bleeping sounds. ralph took that as a

"yes."

He brought his case into view. "Well, then I suggest grabbing one, or even a handful, now, as this is a one-time only opportunity."

The robot bleeped again.

"Why don't we step inside? I could show you some of my finer specimens. Believe me when I say, dildos are one of the world's most versatile inventions."

It started leaking oil onto the carpet.

Ralph felt flustered. Perhaps the best he could do was leave.

"Well, good day," he said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you." As he was about to turn away, a pinprick of light appeared in the center of the robot's chest and lengthened across it in a beam. The beam arched down and became the 23

kevin L. donihe

outline of a door, the demarcated segment opening like a drawbridge as ralph's case rumbled and light emanated from it in rays. Then locks unfastened, and dildos, dozens and dozens of them, flew from the case and into the robot. When the last dildo was through the breach, the door and case both slammed shut.

For a second, ralph feared that the robot might take the dildos and leave without paying him. but the door opened again, and a belly full of pennies slid out from it onto the porch.

He picked up one of the pennies, studied it. The obverse featured a happy-looking walrus head, wearing a monocle. The reverse said only, ONE CENT.

ralph put this coin in his pocket as a souvenir. The rest, he scooted off the porch. "I give these to the ground," he said.

As if on vocal cue, grass blades wrapped around the pennies.

The ground swallowed them and, afterwards, expelled air like a burp.

ralph didn't mind the loss. Money was a means of transaction, and, once that transaction was complete, it became meaningless.

big-top music started playing in the robot's house. He looked past the robot just as a banner unfurled from the ceiling, stretching from one side of the living room to the other as streamers and confetti fell.

CONGRATULATIONS, RALPH!

—GOd

knowing something, somewhere, had been watching heartened him. Perhaps certain powers—powers that cared for his best interests—were congratulating him on sticking around and seeing it through to the end.

"Thank you," he said, though to whom exactly he could not say.

The robot spat out a roll of white tape from a slot where a 24

The Traveling dildo Salesman

naval would be were it human. When the roll stopped getting longer, ralph reached down, pulled it off.

Maybe this was his ticket out of the world, but the script was reminiscent of hieroglyphics, and he could decipher none of it. One marking was somewhat evocative, though. It was a heart, and it reminded him of a locket that hung on an old woman's neck. Within that heart image, he realized suddenly, were words too small to read.

He folded the strip, put it in his pocket. "Good day, sir," ralph said, more out of habit, as he was sure the thing hadn't heard him, then added, sincerely, "And thank you so very, very much."

"Good day to you, too," the thing said in a low, halting electronic register.

On the road, ralph was met with a feeling like déjà vu. It was, he realized, also a feeling of joy, before, joy had been just a word, no way to conceptualize it. As he pondered this, he realized that he might just love the robot. It had finally squared his circle.

Ralph glanced up at the sky, looking, perhaps, for a flaming chariot or magic carpet. When would he transcend this place?

He hoped it would be soon, but if he had to wait, be patient, then so be it. At that moment, ralph realized that he still carried his case. How silly of him. He tossed it to the street.

In his pocket, the phone rang. His smile was so wide it felt eternal. He couldn't wait to talk to Mom, tell her the news.

"Hello!" he shouted before she even had time to speak.

"My, you sound excited!"

"I am, Mom; I am! you won't believe this, but I sold my dildos to a robot!"

She sighed. "robots are such nice people."

"They are, Mom. really and truly."

"I'm so proud of you, Son."

25

kevin L. donihe

"I'm proud of me, too! It's over and I can go home!" On the line: awkward silence.

"Mom?" ralph asked.

"I hate to say this," she said, finally, "but have you looked in your case since the robot bought your dildos?"

"No. Why?"

"I just think you should look, that's all."

ralph bent down, opened the case. A large pink dildo, threaded with pulsing veins, sat to the left of a smaller translucent blue one and to the right of a realistic-looking yet grossly oversized basic model.

"Oh shi—crap, Mom!" ralph said. He considered rushing back to the house. There, he would accost the robot, make it buy the last three dildos.

"you are never to return to a house you've already tried," Mom said, her tone a bit sterner. "It's part of the rules."

"Okay. I'm just ... a little disappointed."

"Still, Son, this is good," she said. "In fact, it's very, very good. Just think of how much closer you are now..."

"I know. I know. being close is great, but it's not the same as making it."

"I understand, dear, but you're doing great. I'm so very proud of you. Never forget that and keep plugging away, do it for your old, dead mother."

"I will. I promise. And thank you, Mom."

ralph could almost see her smile. "No, thank you. you've said all I wanted to hear."

26

Chapter Three

Sunnays no longer shined through clouds. Night insects screamed in the distance. In front of and behind ralph, the lights in all the houses went out simultaneously.

Thinking back, he couldn't recall ever seeing homeowners in their yards after dark. No flickers of light or shadows passing by windows, either. Perhaps everyone left via tunnels or simply ceased to be until morning.

If so, he imagined it'd be okay to sleep in one of the houses, as it seemed a crime for so much space to go unused, night after night.

Then ralph thought he remembered something about a big, threatening black shadow that warned him never to approach any house after dark. but what if that shadow was just a phantom from some long ago dream? Maybe he'd already entered houses, slept in them numerous times.

A rested salesman, Ralph figured, was preferable to an exhausted one, so he stepped out onto the property. In lieu of a plastic animal, a metallic sculpture of a red broken heart sat on a marble base surrounded by a small herb garden. directly behind the house: a patch of dense woods.

One of the windows was open slightly. From it, ralph heard a song, its melody warm and happy, its lyrics muffled by walls. Curiosity overpowered him. He walked to the sill, took hold of it and pushed himself up.

Losing his balance, he fell from the window to the floor.

His left shoulder stung a bit, but pain was forgotten, as he now heard the lyrics to the song clearly:

Your trials are near their end.

27

kevin L. donihe

Relax in memory;

Relax in what soon shall be

And become yourself again...

First his shoulders and then his mind relaxed as he walked through a den populated with comfy looking furniture and charming knickknacks. A set of bronze hands, clasped in prayer, sat atop the Tv. Old porcelain dolls lined the mantle above a lit fireplace.

In an adjacent bedroom, colorful jars of perfume were displayed on the dresser. A gray shawl was draped over one bedpost. A rack full of yellowing magazines sat by the nightstand. On the wall above the bed was a family photograph, faded, tattered at the edges and containing three smiling people.

The smallest guy looked like the sort of kid he might have once been.

ralph remembered, suddenly, that this was the room where his grandmother had once slept. Her name was Meg. Or Marge.

Or Mabel. ralph wished he could call her as well, but maybe she'd been dead for so long that her voice was just a whisper.

He entered a short and narrow hal before finding himself in the kitchen. On the refrigerator, held up by an apple-shaped mag-net, was a drawing of a stick figure standing beside a stick house in a stick world with a happy sun and no leering blue eye in sight.

FOr GRANNy, big, red, crayon-rendered words at the top said.

Turning to his right, he saw the entranceway to the dining room and, through it, a massive, ornate wooden table, ostentatious in such an otherwise homespun milieu. China plates and platters and cups held enough food to satiate at least twenty people. ralph eyed the turkey breast in the center of the table. His stomach rumbled, and he looked down at his stick-like arms, then felt the ribs beneath his shirt.

Still, he stared at the food for another minute, reveling in the sheer awesomeness of the spread before approaching the 28

The Traveling dildo Salesman

table and taking his seat. He touched the turkey leg. It was hot.

The stuffing produced warm steam that condensed against his hand. He seized a knife, gold from the looks of it, and dug in, slicing off a chunk of turkey breast. He dropped it on his plate, took a bite and oh did it taste wonderful, like Christmas and Thanksgiving combined.

Quickly, he reached for a spoon buried in a bowl of mashed potatoes, but, upon lifting it, noticed that it was connected by wire to the bottom of the bowl. Something cicked; a guillotine blade from the ceiling smashed into the table. ralph looked down. His fork had been halved; the top quarter of his thumb was gone, too.

He stood up. A blade as wide as the room itself descended, splitting the entire kitchen. The left side of the room fell away as the turkey rose from the plate, picked up a carving knife with its wing and flashed it. The severed neck mimicked a mouth and smiled unpleasantly.

A third blade whooshed, this time from the side. ralph ducked as it sheared away the uppermost quarters of the house.

before he could reorient himself, whirling blades on stalks and nozzles shot up from the floor, busting boards and sending clouds of dust and crawlspace skeletons into the air.

The devices gave chase, playing oddly soothing Musak from tiny speakers all the while. ralph's feet wanted to tap against his volition, but he couldn't let these frequencies into his brain. He ignored them as much as he was able and jumped over a fourth blade that threatened his feet.

Outside, he ran in the direction of the woods. The nozzles, hoses and blades shut off their music, made disconcerting chattering sounds. Turning, Ralph saw the open, needle-filled maw of a hose hovering mere inches from his neck.

running faster, he began to smell pine needles, wild flowers and fragrant roots. He concentrated on these odors and blocked from his mind everything that wasn't associated with them or his pounding feet. Seconds later, darkness gave 29

kevin L. donihe

way to a tangle of browns and greens. The nozzles, hoses and blades attempted to enter alongside, but impacted against tree trunks or were ensnared in vines.

ralph continued until he could go no farther. Into a bed of pine needles below a dead tree he fell.

It took him a while to regain consciousness, and longer still to stop feeling as though he was about to die. Earlier, he'd breathed so hard that he feared his lungs might burst, he worried that his heart might beat out of his chest or that a blood vessel might explode in his brain. Now, all he felt was a throbbing sensation in his thumb. The bleeding had stopped, but he feared infection. bandages weren't available on his route, and he'd never seen a doctor's office.

ralph didn't want to think about this. It didn't make him feel any better. There was, however, one thing that could.

He didn't like killing little animals—or anything, for that matter—but it was unavoidable. Large prey was off the menu.

It had to be a creature small enough so that the force of a dildo thrown against its head would either kill it or render it unconscious. Still, a meager dinner was better than no dinner at all. In a bush, he heard something scamper. He waited a few seconds and saw a rabbit peek out its head, nose twitching.

ralph felt for his case, opened it. One dildo was awake.

He recognized the dildo he'd killed, seized it, and closed the case before the conscious dildo could consider escape. He moved his throwing arm into position, but rustled some leaves.

Though ralph tossed the dildo quickly, the rabbit was gone before it hit the ground.

"damn!"

He retrieved the dildo, waited for more prey, waited until he imagined he might just as well go to bed. Then the noises came.

30

The Traveling dildo Salesman

He wondered what it could be. The thing sounded decently sized as it trundled through leaves. Maybe it was a skunk. ralph recalled eating one, and it had agreed neither with his palate nor his stomach.

The thing got closer. It was a groundhog.

"Stay right where you are," he whispered beneath his breath. "don't move a muscle."

The groundhog turned to ralph. Had it heard him and understood what he said? Nonsense. ralph pitched the dildo.

It sailed through the air, spinning twice before it hit the fat, furry thing's head and knocked it cold. A rear leg twitched.

"Gotcha!" ralph bolted from his position and ran to the animal before it had time to regain its bearings. The blow, he could tell, had only stunned it.

He picked up the dead dildo and put it in his pocket. He wasn't even halfway back to the campsite when the groundhog came to. The thing scratched at his arms and screamed as though human, mouth open wide, nostrils flaring so obscenely that ralph believed he'd see the animal's brain were the lighting better.

He couldn't take the sight, much less the sound. He pinned the groundhog against a nearby tree and slammed the dildo hard against its head.

It still twitched, so ralph struck the thing, again and again.

"Just die already!" he screamed.

Minutes later, the groundhog's head lolled around the side of ralph's hand. He watched it for a few minutes more, half-expecting it to twitch or scream. When it did neither, he sat out to build a small fire and then go about the unpleasant task of running the groundhog through with a stick.

Groundhog flesh crackled and popped in the fire. When the meat was done, Ralph removed it from the flames, wiped off a 31

kevin L. donihe

blanket of black, melted fur and brought the crispy groundhog to his lips. He took a bite and had memories of cold, sweet things on sticks that tasted nothing at all like this. Though he hoped it would be a long time before he ate groundhog again, he finished all meat but the face and tail.

With a belly full of vile, hairy food, ralph laid down to sleep. For warmth, he layered pine needles atop his chest before coiling into a fetal ball. It took a few minutes, but he drifted off as the fire died down and blackened pieces of wood turned into crackling red and white embers and then became nothing at all.

ralph awoke with a start. A nearby rustling had disturbed his sleep. He turned the way of the sound and beheld the white, glowing bodies of those he called the Orb Passers. He'd forgotten about them and the name he'd given them. Now, it seemed that he saw them every night, and they always did the same inscrutable thing, carrying illuminated silver orbs like sacred objects, passing them back and forth, holding them aloft briefly, letting the light from the moon kiss them, or maybe giving the eye in the sky a better look.

Who were they? What did they want? Were they living clues? Angels? devils? Messengers?

He had to approach them.

ralph sat up, dusted himself off and started walking. The twigs under his feet made very loud noises, louder than they had any right to sound. He cursed them, but the Orb Passers didn't seem to care or notice. They continued passing and lifting, lifting and passing.

Closer still, he saw that the things were naked, but didn't have genitalia.

He crept up to them, addressed one. "Could you help me?"

I want to know why I'm here and what's happening." The thing just glowed. It had no face.

"If you can say or do anything, I'd be much obliged." More lifting. More passing...

ralph bit his bottom lip. "Can't you do anything else?" The being reached out a bright finger, pointed to his pants pocket.

ralph was confused until he remembered what he'd stored there. He reached in, wincing as fabric scraped across his wound. Now with his other hand, he dug deep and brought forth the paper strip that the robot had given him. "do you mean this?" he asked.

The glowing thing nodded and took the strip from ralph.

A black hole opened in the center of its head. Into the hole, it put the strip.

ralph wanted to shriek, perhaps even punch the Orb Passer. It had destroyed a vital piece of the puzzle. but his anger quieted when the thing presented its orb for ralph's inspection. Inside the crystal, he saw the image of the strip, close up on the heart, and now the tiny words inside it were legible:

THE FrST HOuSE OF THE dAy WILL bE yOur

LAST, IF yOu ArE A GOOd SALESMAN.

ralph staggered back to his campsite, body tingling. It took almost an hour before sleep claimed him. His thoughts raced, but in a good way, as he imagined all the things that might soon be.

Chapter Four

ralph awoke to a perfect spring morning. He took to his feet moments later, as it seemed wrong to waste time lying around on a day that held so much promise.

But what if you mess it up?

That thought tried to dissipate the good feelings taking root inside him, so he shook it away. He would make the best damn sale in the history of salesmanship, and be rewarded for it.

ralph freshened up by a stream of bright, almost navy blue water, a color more soothing than the bright red of the streaks that crisscrossed his mangled thumb. blood infection, he thought, but tried to worry no more about it. It was something a doctor could treat once he sold his last dildo and left this place for good.

He returned to his case, opened it, looked inside, but no dildo fought him or tried to escape, the two survivors content to just undulate quietly. Maybe these were the better-behaved ones. Or maybe they were less rambunctious now there was no more safety in numbers.

ralph closed the case and picked it up to begin his day. It felt almost weightless in his grasp, not like a burden at all.

ralph stepped out onto the road and came face-to-face with another billboard. It featured the same artwork of the happy, breakfast cereal eating family, but, this time, the text read: IT

ISN'T THE GOVERNMENT.

His memory of the day before was already degrading, but he was almost certain that the previous sign had implicated the government. Then he remembered the clue by the exploded 34

The Traveling dildo Salesman

man's house, though he wasn't sure if it had told him to trust or not to trust billboards.

No matter. He had better, more important things to consider.

The bus was already at the stop when he passed it. He gave it a second glance, but only because he couldn't recall ever seeing a bus on his route. He'd be receiving a better way out than via public transit soon enough.

before him, the houses were all in the form of squat, almost featureless rectangles. There was no way of telling which would be the special one, the deciding factor, but it was along the line, somewhere, and, if necessary, Ralph would walk all day to find it. He passed just ten houses, and there it was: the shadow of a tree cast upon the house elongated, losing its branches and leaves, becoming a line, which then became deep black, like paint instead of shadow. The base of the line bifurcated into an arrow that pointed down at the door. Within seconds, the arrow was gone, the innocuous tree shadow once again cast upon the house, but that brief sign was all he needed.

On the lawn: a plastic statue of a fat, rosy-cheeked cherub.

When Ralph first noticed it, it wore a neutral expression. Upon a second glance, it smiled at him. Plastic eyes twinkled. ralph couldn't help but smile back.

The smile faded as he glanced down at his case. It was streaked with red and yellow discharge from his thumb. ralph sat the case down, scrubbed it in the grass. He considered looking at his thumb again, but didn't want that image fresh on his mind as he tried to make the sale.

He stepped onto the porch, knocked at the door. When it opened, a young, neat-looking man dressed in beige slacks and a white button-up shirt stood at the threshold. His face was soft and pleasant, reminiscent, somewhat, of the cherub.

35

kevin L. donihe

ralph launched into his spiel. "Hello, my name is ralph, and I'm a traveling dildo salesman."

"Hello, sir," the man said. "My name is Steve, and I'm your potential customer."

ralph was taken aback. He'd found someone who was polite, well spoken. "Well, nice to meet you, Steve," he said.

"Might I interest you in one of my fine dildos?"

"I could take a look..."

Of course you could, ralph thought. He opened the case, afraid that the dildos might be in a rambunctious mood—Murphy's Law—but the two living ones were as quiet and orderly as before.

Steve craned his head to see inside. In ralph's estimation, he looked impressed.

"I simply love the color and texture of that one," ralph said. "don't you?"

"My, it is pretty!" Steve pointed at the red one just beside it. "but I think I like this one even better." ralph smiled. There was no way he wouldn't make this sell.

"I'd say they both have positive attributes," he said.

Steve studied the third dildo; his face scrunched. "Isn't that one dead?"

ralph bit his bottom lip. "No, it's not."

"Oh, okay. Guess it's just a quiet one."

"yes, and personally, I've found that quiet dildos are the best dildos."

"These are all nice, yes." He paused, looked at ralph. "but tell me, are they expensive?"

"Just a penny each."

"really? I thought you'd ask for more."

"I just need to sell these. I don't care about making a profit."

ld give them away if I could, but that's against the rules." Steve scratched his chin. "Okay, the price is good; the product is good. Everything looks good."

"So, you are interested! Wonderful!" He flashed a smile 36

The Traveling dildo Salesman

that he sensed would seal the deal.

The man reached out— *This is it!* ralph's mind screamed—

but he only took two dildos and gave ralph two pennies.

"you forgot one, sir," ralph said.

Steve looked confused. "No, I didn't."

"but you did." He tilted the case, pointed. "See, here it is."

"I simply cannot take that last one."

Something flipped in his stomach. "What?"

"I'm terribly sorry."

ralph fought rising horror, but Steve had been an easy customer before, and he hadn't closed the door, was still standing at the threshold, smiling, being pleasant, but, most importantly, available. Getting Steve to take the last dildo had to be the true and final test of his salesman's mettle.

He composed himself, threw the two pennies to the ground, said, "really, these are a set, and you wouldn't want to break up a set, would you? Individual pieces might become lonely."

"It's just not possible. No offense."

Control over the situation seemed lost. Was the ship already sunk? What if ... what if he wasn't supposed to lie? If that was the test, then he'd already failed. ralph wanted to bite his nails.

run his hands through his hair. Fling his body off the porch and flail in the grass.

Compose yourself, damn it!

He cleared his already clear throat before making himself speak coherently. "you must take it, sir. This is my last house, and, really, I can't have remaining inventory." The man just shook his head.

Ralph clenched his fists. "If you don't take it, so help me, I'll—" He made himself stop, realizing he was losing his professional cool, becoming disrespectful. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Must be the heat." Suddenly, snowflakes fell from overhead.

"No problem," Steve replied, but didn't utter a word about purchasing another dildo.

"Come on, just take the thing."

37

kevin L. donihe

"but that would be one too many dildos, and you know what they say about that."

ralph had no idea. All he knew was that his emotional floodgates were about to burst. "Why can't you just buy the dildo, you son of a bitch!" he shouted. "do you want me to do this shit forever?" He lifted his thumb, now swollen, pulsing and green. "do you want this to kill me?"

Steve lifted his hands, a placating gesture. "No sir, and I don't want to do this forever, either." He glanced at the remaining dildo. "Still, I told you it was very nice, and I haven't changed my opinion."

ralph seized the dildo, brandished it in his customer's face.

"Then take the fucking thing!"

"but I can't, no matter how much I may desire it. God always buys the last dildo from salesmen."

ralph thought back to the banner. "God?"

Steve nodded.

"And you said, salesmen?"

"Oh yes, I've seen plenty of traveling dildo salesman.

They're all over these parts."

He never imagined there might be others, and wasn't sure whether to believe this news or not.

"I just ignored them in the past," Steve continued, "or was mean to them. Sometimes very, very mean." His eyes lost focus. "One I even chopped up and stored in the basement until the smell got to me."

ralph took two steps back. "you did?"

"And I made love to the parts like you wouldn't believe!

but I'm a different man now. I understand what it's like to have to do the same thing, day in and day out, with scant hope of ever stopping." He seemed suddenly wistful. "I had a life too, you know. We all did, and, my lord, I see it so clearly now." Watching this man, ralph almost wanted to cry. "I'm sorry for getting mad at you earlier."

"Oh, that's okay. I'm sorry it took me so long to finally 38

The Traveling dildo Salesman

help out a traveling dildo salesman, but I've got to go." He paused briefly. "Good luck."

With that, Steve's body shimmered like a Christmas tree. He waved as the sparkles intensified, smiled and then disappeared.

Turning, ralph noticed a fork in the ordinarily straight road. He couldn't wait to take this path, see where it led. Then he remembered someone named Mom, and realized that he should call her, tell her of this wonderful news.

He reached into his pocket. Found the phone. He dialed numbers at random, heard the other end start ringing, and waited for Mom's sweet, sweet voice to fill his ear.

Instead, all he heard were distant murmurs, like several people speaking to one another far from the receiver.

"Hello," he said.

It sounded as though the people were walking towards the phone. One voice sounded gruff, masculine.

"I—I would like to speak to Mom, please," ralph continued.

Suddenly, an angry man shouted into the receiver. "Hang up the phone!"

ralph did so quickly. His nerves jangled, but he made himself relax and not think too much about it. Maybe he'd gotten the wrong number. Perhaps he could tell Mom about the events of the day himself, in person, once it was through.

On the new road, the only thing ralph noticed was more billboards, hundreds if not thousands of them, lining both sides and blocking all other sensory input.

ALIENS ArE dOING IT, said one.

He wondered if this related to his predicament, or was a mere sexual declaration.

Another: yOu ArE rEALLY dEAd.

And on the next billboard, just a few yards up: yOu CAN

NEvEr dIE.

39

kevin L. donihe

This was followed by a litany of positive statements rendered negative by subsequent ones. So many groups implicated, then vindicated: bankers, masons, iluminati, televangelists, working mothers, electricians, dental hygienists and, more prosaically, the bus driver, ralph's customers and even himself.

He decided to pay no further attention, as he now recalled the exploded man's clue quite clearly. These were just falsehoods and distractions he had to pass before the truth was revealed.

He soldiered on. The road curved. beyond, billboards vanished and a vista opened, revealing a hill, the base of which stretched for miles. The change in topography stunned ralph, and he walked to it like a supplicant towards an idol.

Pavement soon changed into an overgrown footpath that snaked up the hill. It felt weird, but very welcome, traveling upwards after so much time spent on flat and monotonous ground.

Near the summit, he noticed a sign posted in front of a thorn bush. A SLIGHT LEFT FOr uNdErSTANdING, it said. ralph turned in the direction indicated, entering a path that traveled between parallel lines of oaks, each tree equidistant from the other. Overhead, branches tangled in an organic canopy.

He walked this path until he noticed space where a tree was missing. In its place was another sign: GO HErE.

ralph found himself in a clearing. Looking up, he beheld a towering dildo-shaped building looming a field's length ahead. Its chimney—jutting from the penis tip—was actually a smokestack, belching out black puffs of steam.

He ran to the building, stopping when he saw another sign, this one posted at the door.

THIS IS THE PLACE; kNOCK FOr ANSWErS.

When he did, the door did not swing open, but slid away so quickly that it seemed to disappear. before him stood the robot, then the old, smoking woman, then the exploded man and a hundred and then a thousand different other faces, all 40

The Traveling dildo Salesman

he'd seen before, though most he had forgotten.

Finally, the image settled on a beautiful tow-haired woman.

She wore a simple white dress that sparkled. A disk of wan light surrounded her head.

"Are you God?" ralph asked her.

"yes, I am."

"I thought you might be scary." He looked down at his feet as he spoke, humbled in her presence.

"Please, look me in the eyes." She touched his cheek, her hands warm. "There's no need for fear."

ralph glanced up reluctantly. Her irises were electric blue islands in white seas, and, as he looked into them, nervousness fled. "So," she said, "You are finally here." He forced himself to look past God's eyes, and behind her, saw a huge metal room, filled with machines on which thousands of old women in hairnets toiled. "yes," he said,

"but where am I?"

"This is Heaven, the factory in which all your dildos were made."

"really?" ralph craned his neck to see farther. He noticed a group of old women gathered on a bench by the adjacent wall, painting a line of floppy sex toys. To the right, additional old ladies sat in chairs, hands behind their backs as younger-seeming people in black clothes and helmets stood over them, shoving dildos into their mouths and moving them back and forth, testing for proper circumference, perhaps. To the left, others stuffed finished products into suitcases identical to the one ralph carried.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "If you want, we can tour the factory later, but we should be outside now. The eye in the sky must bear witness to this event." God stepped across the threshold and ralph followed. She sat down in a lotus position on the grass. He took this as his cue to take a seat as well, though he couldn't manage the lotus.

41

kevin L. donihe

"Tell me, ralph," she said, "what is it you want to know most?"

"So, my name is ralph."

"yes, but do tell..."

"I want to know the answer."

She nodded. "After coming so far, you deserve it. Many dildo salesmen never sell even a single dildo. you sold yours in your first two weeks, though years passed before you sold another." A smile. "despite the odds, you remained steadfast, diliigently picking up and piecing together clues. Now, it's time to reward your efforts."

His nerves felt positively alive, his spine, electric. "Oh thank you!" he effused. "Thank you so much!"

"No need to thank me. Thank yourself for what is to be." She looked down at his mangled thumb. "But first, let me take care of that. Please, extend your hand."

ralph did, and God touched the stump where his nail had once been. Warmth branched through his fingers and down his arm as, like a mushroom, the missing tip grew. "My god," he said, surveying the digit, looking for seams but seeing none.

"Now, I must prepare..." God closed her eyes, tilted her head towards the sky, linked her forearms and lifted them so that her unfolded hands were bunched near her sternum. It looked as though she might be holding an orb ralph could not see.

She maintained this position, and total silence, for what seemed to be a very, very long time. ralph wished she'd hurry up, but said nothing, imagining it wasn't wise to rush God.

Finally, she arose. "I am ready, so stand, ralph. Present onto me the final dildo in your case."

"And then I can be free?"

God said nothing, just smiled, so ralph handed her the dildo. The passing felt like a sacrament.

She outstretched her other hand, opened it. "And here's your penny."

42

The Traveling dildo Salesman

ralph looked at his ticket out. He saw the usual walrus-face-wearing-a-monocle, but there was now a single word below it, rendered in bas-relief. CONGRATS. He took the coin from her, flipped it over. NOW BEGIN AGAIN said the reverse.

Suddenly, the case by his feet started shaking, and then was enveloped in white light. When the light faded, ralph beheld at least a hundred violent, angry dildos, flopping on the ground, gnashing their teeth.

"Now go on," said God, "continue your endless journey." ralph held up his hands. "No, wait ... this ... this is supposed to be the end! This is supposed to be—"

"There is no end, ralph. Not here, but that's okay. It's the quest that's noble, not the outcome."

He shook his head back and forth. "I can't do this anymore!" A dildo crept up to his foot, and he stomped it. "I just can't!"

"don't worry. Tomorrow, you won't remember a thing."

"but I know now, and that's the problem!"

"There's no problem."

He felt on the verge of crying, screaming and breaking things. "Come on, God! Isn't there something you can do?"

"We could tour the factory," she said.

"I don't want to tour the fucking factory!"

God drummed her fingers on her hips. "Okay, Ralph, I'll lay it on the line. Freedom just doesn't work for you. you'll always swirl back to the center, and that's exactly where you're going when we're done here."

"I don't understand."

She laughed. "you sound like someone who hasn't had this conversation with me a hundred times before, but that's to be expected."

ralph could only look at her.

"you may be mad now, you may even want to kill me, but you'll come back with that same awe-struck expression you wore earlier, overjoyed to see me and wanting what you think you desire, but ultimately getting what you need." 43

kevin L. donihe

He lashed out. "I'll never come back to you! And this isn't what I need!"

Her tone was pal iative again. "Without dildos and the unfur-ling road to nowhere, you have no direction, no purpose. you're not strong enough to assign meaning to life by any other means."

"No, this isn't—"

"you're concerned and agitated, but don't be. Many have the same problem, and, when the time is right, they'll return to the center, too. It's the way it must be, now and forevermore."

"Maybe they'll return, but I refuse!"

"but you've returned every time before." She twirled an index finger in the air. "Swirl, swirl, swirl..." ralph smacked her hand down. "Not this time! Now is different!"

God laughed. "Now is never different. If it was, do you think this factory would be here, churning out all the dildos for all the traveling dildo salesman of the world? business is booming."

ralph tried to get a word in edge-wise, but God wouldn't let him.

"you remember that woman on the phone? It wasn't your mother. It was a voice actor." She grinned. "your mother works for us now, in the advanced product testing department with all the other old, dead mothers who have traveling dildo salesmen for sons."

"No, that's not true! There's not a shred of truth in you!"

"The only truth lies in your case, so pick it up."

"I will not!"

God reached out, caressed his face. Her hands felt cold now. "you know this is a mistake," she said, "but you have time to correct it. Just do as I say. We can pretend that this never happened."

ralph repeated his declaration.

God shook her head. "I don't always give traveling dildo salesmen this chance, believe me." A small flipbook appeared 44

The Traveling dildo Salesman

in her hand. "I've got pictures. Want to see?" Ralph didn't, but she opened the flipbook, showed him a few of its pages.

"This is a mere sampling. I've got a bigger book in my office."

His stomach twisted; he wanted to gag. His legs tried to fold and carry him to the ground, after which they would surely arise from it and carry him back to his case and to his life as a traveling dildo salesman, *ad infinitum*.

No, he wouldn't allow it. Maybe terrible things had happened to those poor guys, but that didn't mean they had to happen to him ... and so what if they did?

"My mind hasn't changed," he said. "you can do nothing to me. I'm not someone in your book. I am ralph." Suddenly, it seemed that there was more to his name than simply that.

Then it dawned on him. "ralph Stevens," he added, and couldn't help but grin.

God's ears bled at the sound of that name. "Pick up your case!" she shrieked. "Someone must take it, and you're the only one here that can!"

"No, I'm not the only one!" He dumped the dildos from the case. "I'll give these to the ground!"

The ground took the dildos not into its mouth—that was a place for pennies—but into its womb. Exiting the resting state, dildos germinated, entangling beneath the surface, becoming a network of helices as the earth spewed a mound of pennies from its bowels.

ralph smiled. "The transaction is complete." The world felt the new growth, started shrieking. God threw herself atop the copper mound, shrieking the loudest of all the shrieking things. She looked up at him, her mouth filled with ivory tusks. "you can't do this!" she screamed. Her words were muffled and slurred.

"I already did!" He pointed at the pennies. "They are mine, and there's nothing you can do!"

45

kevin L. donihe

The bottom half of God's body became that of a walrus.

ralph almost laughed at the sight. Seconds later, her top half followed suit. She even had the monocle, though it was hard to think of God as female now.

The God-thing barked and belched as its flesh started to flake, then crack and peel. It tried to clutch at Ralph's pant leg with a flipper. That flipper fell off, followed by tusks, the other flipper and even more vital parts. Something white and foamy shot from God's mouth before the remains of its brown, flabby body went rigid and rolled to the left of the penny mound.

Ignoring God, ralph took handfuls of pennies and dumped them into both coat pockets, then into his pants.

up ahead, he heard a sudden commotion. A mob clamored up the hill, approaching him from the west.

ralph recognized some of the people, though he did not see his last customer. The man who had beaten him prior to exploding headed the line. To his left was the once motionless smoking woman, now running as fast as the newly reconstituted man. behind them, in an unbroken and seemingly eternal line, fanning out from left to right, were potential customers from days and months and years past. Some carried impromptu torches, fashioned from sticks or broken furniture legs wrapped in kerosene-dipped cloth. Others carried pitchforks.

From the opposite direction, orb passers sprinted from the woods. They shook their fists and hurled their balls at him. One impacted against a tree, leaving a hole big enough for ralph to see through.

The closest thrower hurled a second orb. There was no avoiding it. ralph stopped, took a deep breath, knowing that, if he died, at the very least, he wouldn't die as a traveling dildo salesman, but the thing passed through him, leaving only an electrical sensation in its wake.

The first pitchfork-wielder reached him. Like the orb, his weapon had no effect.

"die already!" screamed the man who had exploded. His 46

The Traveling dildo Salesman

body swelled as he tried to stab again.

The old smoking woman said nothing, but attempted without success to brain him with her torch.

The robot bleeped, and then caught fire. But it wasn't just the robot that had malfunctioned. Everything started to burn as didos completed the germination cycle.

He turned away from it all then, away from the rows of houses, the endless streets, the orb passers, killing machines and the factory and its god. As he walked, the world peeled slightly at its edges. The bright tip of something different shined through. ralph could barely see whatever it was, but, somehow, it seemed like stuff from memory.

In his pocket, the phone started ringing. It was his faux-mother. Fuck her. She was probably on fire, too.

epilogue

ralph took the path back down the hill, surrounded by burning trees and sky, but didn't get far before he noticed that the footpath ahead of him had changed into a road. About twenty yards farther, ralph saw a bus stop.

He only had to wait a minute for the bus to arrive. Its door opened and the same driver—it was always the same driver—

regarded him, seemingly not fazed by the conflagration going on all around him. "Hello, ralph," he said.

ralph nodded, but did not move. He'd been rebuffed so many times before, and, worse yet, flames had broken out on the street between him and the bus.

"Why are you just staring at me? Get on."

"I can't. Too much fire."

"Just walk through it."

Figuring he had little to lose, ralph did. He was impervious to the flames. Still, he paused just before reaching the bus.

Crossing its threshold seemed more challenging than a walk through fire. "I can get on now? Really and truly?"

"really and truly."

"It's ... as easy as that?"

The man smiled. "Sure is, but hurry. I've got other salesmen to pick up down the line."

"but I don't have a ticket."

"That's alright." The driver pointed to his case, lying in the middle of the road; ralph didn't remember dropping it.

"Leaving that behind is better than a ticket." ralph put his left foot on the step, then his right foot. Past the steps, he looked around at his fellow passengers. The bus was packed. He noticed that no one carried cases or luggage of 48

The Traveling dildo Salesman

any kind, and all were dressed in suits identical to ralph's.

Finally, he found a seat. The passenger across from him, a scrawny-looking middle-aged fellow, turned his way. "Hello, there," he said as the bus took flight.

"Hey," replied ralph. "you're a salesman, too?" He grinned. "Was."

"Oh, sorry." ralph tried to smooth over his faux pas with pleasantries. "So, how long were you selling?"

"87.3 years."

The man didn't look a day over forty. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"but how do you know? And how were you able to keep track of time?"

"I didn't know, and I couldn't keep track."

"Then I don't understand."

The man shrugged. "It just came to me a few minutes ago, and, if you wait, I bet the same will happen to you." It was all coming back to him now. "you're right," ralph said. "So, how many years has it been?"

"11.6."

A toothless old man in front of them turned, said, "Hell, you're both youngins! I've been doin' this for 121 years!" A look of amazement spread across the other man's face.

ralph was amazed, too. He almost wished he could bow, but couldn't, as he was sitting down. Instead, he stared out his window, watching people burn from on high until they flamed out. Then larger things crumbled: trees, the factory and the ground beneath it, falling away and becoming nothing, or maybe something else entirely.

When he was too far up to see anymore, ralph turned back to the front of the bus. The eye in the sky was so big that it filled the driver's window.

"you were watching it burn, weren't you?" the man across from him said.

49

kevin L. donihe

"yeah," replied ralph, still staring at the eye. "but couldn't you see it, too?"

"No, buddy. That was your stop. but I watched it burn at mine and loved every minute it."

He turned to him then. "Wait... you saw God and the factory and got the coin, right?"

The man nodded.

"but if it burned for you, then it couldn't have burned for me." He shrugged. "I guess we all have our own versions of this place."

"I wish every version would burn," ralph said. "And I almost wish I could stay to help burn them."

"Nah, that's too much responsibility for one man. We can't help other salesmen, you know. We can only help ourselves." With that, the man picked up a magazine wedged between the seats in front of him, and ralph sat back to enjoy the rest of the ride, the eye so prevalent now that only the big blue iris and pupil were

visible. When he glanced back out his own window, ralph saw a billboard, hanging in the middle of nothing in the sky. yOu ArE NOW rE-ENTErING, it said.

It seemed as though the sign was incomplete. you are now re-entering what? but then he thought about it, and decided it really did make sense.

Turning around, ralph saw what was on the back of the sign through the bus' rear windows:

yOu HAVE rE-ENTErEd.

The bus traveled into the pupil of the eye, and the eye blinked.

50

milkY

agiTaTion

Milky Agitation

William Ezra Thoreau poured a tall glass of milk. He returned the jug to the refrigerator and closed the door quickly so that the things inside couldn't escape. William brought the glass with him to the kitchen table. There, he unfolded his newspaper and read articles about dead people and whirling things in the sky.

A thick, German accented voice broke the silence: "Please don't drink me."

William looked down at the milk. "Talkative today, aren't we? Can't you see I'm trying to read?"

"I don't have eyes," replied the milk.

"Sorry about that; I had an aunt who was blind." He returned his gaze to the paper. "I'm still going to drink you, though."

The milk glass vibrated madly. "Please, sir! Please don't make me beg!"

"For God's sake, could you just—"

"I'm willing to offer you anything!" The milk paused.

"Anything short of sex?"

William smirked. "I'm afraid it'll have to be sex, love."

"but—"

"It's the only way." He unzipped his pants, leered. "God knows the old wife doesn't inflate me, not since I put her in the basement."

For minutes, the milk remained silent. Finally, a small, reedy voice said, "If that's what it takes, then...okay. but I'm a virgin, so please don't be rough."

William laughed. "I was just joking. What kind of sex could a glass of milk offer?"

"Milk Sex."

His face folded into a grimace. "I don't want to think about that. besides, you're male milk and, if I have sex with you, that might make me gay."

"If I can't give you sex, then what can I give you?"

"Nothing. I'm going to drink you." William paused for 53

kevin L. donihe

effect. "Then, I'll wash your glass."

"but no, you can't!"

"Wrong. I can and I will. drinking is easy, you know. All I have to do is pick you up and gulp you down." The milk sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

"I've drunk milk before—tons of it—and I've never seen a glass so neurotic. In fact, you're the first glass to even talk at all. What's got you so worked up, anyway? Why are you so crazy?"

Condensation dripped from the glass like tears. "because...

because if you drink me, I'll die."

"you're milk," William stated. "Milk is neither alive nor dead."

"Oh." The milk fell silent.

William returned to reading his paper. This week's centerfold was particularly suited to his tastes. He spent some time ogling her flaccid breasts and green skin before moving on to the obituaries on page A9.

"really sorry for disturbing you."

He glared down at the milk glass. "What part of 'neither alive nor dead' didn't you understand?"

The milk said nothing further.

Satisfied, William returned to the newspaper. As he opened the paper to the Sports section, his knuckles clipped the milk glass, sending it to the floor.

He heard laughter both on the way down and following the crash. Out of spite, he got on his hands and knees, licked the spill from the floor, and didn't stop until the milk was gone and his tongue bled.

This made William feel good about himself, but he died a few days later—died after a laughing shard of glass pierced his intestinal wall.

54

TW0-WaY

SanTa

Two-Way Santa

It was a few minutes past final call when I first met Santa Claus.

I'm a nice guy, you see. I often take homeless men back with me to my apartment and let them sleep there for a day or two, sometimes longer. It's according to how I feel about them, and how they make me feel.

On the street, there was hardly any traffic. On the sidewalk: no pedestrians other than me. My fellow drinkers, freshly expelled from the taproom, had all gotten into their cars. They weren't comfortable walking alone this late at night, but I felt at home amongst broken buildings, broken people.

Once the roar of engines faded, I turned my attention to the little things: the sound of refuse blowing in alleyways, the pattern of lights in apartment windows and concrete as it exuded steam from a recent rain. Beneath my feet, pavement felt strangely soft and giving. Traffic lights up ahead jiggled or looked like dancing smears.

Turning a corner, I noticed something slumped against an alley wall. It looked like a sack of garbage, ignored by the sanitation crew. I thought I knew what was hiding under that voluminous, dirty fabric, though. And I was right. I regarded Santa.

His overcoat encased him like an unzipped body bag, only wool-en. His beard was long, white and flowing. A streetlight made his face seem the color of piss. He was old, too—one of the oldest homeless guys I'd seen wandering these parts. I wondered how long he'd been living in alleys in cardboard boxes, or defecating in weeds behind the old strip mall up the road.

Santa had a tart, almost gamy smell. Closer, I noted an all but empty bottle, clutched in his bony right hand.

"Is that whiskey?" I asked.

The man nodded, but made no attempt at eye contact. He appeared to contemplate the pavement. Maybe not even that.

"Looks like you don't have much left," I said, "but I could get you more."

He looked up then, his eyes deep-set, lost in shadow.

"you'd do that for me?"

57

Kevin L. Donihe

"Of course. but you'll have to leave this alley."

"Where would I go?"

"To my place," was my reply.

He studied me, seemed to think. "did you say whiskey?"

Free whiskey?"

"Totally free." I paused a beat. "Will you come?"

"Sure, buddy. I'm game." He stood then, knees shaking.

Quickly, he grasped the wall to avoid a swift return to the pavement.

I offered him my hand. "Need help?"

"No, I'll make it."

I marveled. The man had a trace of dignity left in him after all.

It took ten minutes to traverse the two blocks from the alley in which I'd found my new friend. He was slow, and the way he hobbled behind me made me wonder if one of his legs was gimpy.

I couldn't let him stagger all the way back to my apartment.

At his rate, it would take us an hour to reach. I was ready to get back and show this man both my place and my hospitality, so I steadied him, invited him to lean on my shoulder. He didn't resist me. In fact, he seemed grateful for this small act of kindness.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He just mumbled.

An hour later, I was watching TV, the man was laid out on my bed. He'd fallen asleep almost immediately upon lying down.

He snored loudly. I would have checked on him, intermittently, if not for the snoring. The noise let me know he was okay, that he hadn't swallowed his tongue or choked on his own vomit.

The snores stopped at some point. A minute or so later, I heard the creak of bedsprings.

58

Two-Way Santa

I turned off the TV in the middle of a show. I walked to the bedroom and saw Santa sitting on the bed, legs dangling, his eyes tilted down, looking at the bedspread much like he'd looked at the pavement earlier.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

"I'd feel better if I had another drink," he said, and met my gaze then. In the light, I could better see his eyes—gray and rheumy. One had an obvious cataract. "you promised me a drink, didn't you?"

"I did." I walked to a wooden chest at the foot of the bed and opened it. Fifteen bottles of booze were inside, all for this man and others like him yet to make my acquaintance.

I selected one of the whiskey bottles—expensive stuff, seal unbroken—and lifted it so the man might see.

for the first time, I noticed some life in him. His long, thin arms reached out to me as his hands clutched the air. "Can I have it now?"

I handed him the bottle, smiled. "Of course." He ripped off the plastic wrapper and cracked the seal.

before drinking, he smelled the whiskey, like a taster, but he didn't merely taste it; he downed a fifth of the bottle before drawing a breath.

I pulled up a chair across from him, took a seat. Crossing my legs, I asked, "So, what's your story?"

"What?"

"Everyone has a story. I want to know yours." He belched, wiped his lips. "Why do you care?" That was a good question. I wasn't sure why I cared.

Maybe I didn't and just wanted a little conversation to elevate my mood. "Humor me," I said after a few moments. "I gave you that whole bottle, after all." Then I gestured to the walls.

"And this place for the night..."

"If that's what you want," he said, "but you might not believe it."

Anticipatory tingles started in my fingertips. "Try me." 59

Kevin L. Donihe

"Okay." He paused for another drink, then, "I'm Father Christmas."

"Father Christmas?" I uncrossed my legs, leaned in closer.

"Like Santa Claus, you mean?"

"Yeah, like Santa Claus, but I preferred Father Christmas." He paused. "back *then*, at least, you can call me whatever you want now."

It seemed he was one of the crazy homeless men.

Interesting, sure—but I'd hosted a number of them recently, and not enough of the quiet, shy or sweet types. Still, he didn't strike me as the kind of fellow I'd have to toss out prematurely, so I played along: "I thought Santa—excuse me, Father Christmas—lived at the North Pole."

"Yeah, that's right. *Lived*."

"So, what happened? Mrs. Claus kick you out?"

"No, nothing like that. I'd been growing sick of things for years, and it just came to a head. I mean, doing all that shit for people who'll stop believing in you—it's fucking de-pressing!"

"What did Mrs. Claus think when you left?"

He threw up his hands, sloshing the whiskey. "Nothing!"

She'd been senile for the last two hundred years! Spent all of her time alone in a rocking chair in the attic. She'd put the chair over a loose floorboard, just above my bedroom. I wore earplugs, but I always heard it. Always and forever."

"Couldn't you have gotten a divorce?"

His eyes widened. He seemed aghast. "Santa? *Divorced*?"

Hell no! Eyes narrowed. "but Mrs. Claus can dry up and turn to dust for all I care."

"So you've never returned, not even for a visit?" His tone was matter-of-fact. "When I left, I left for good." I paused, thought for a bit. "If that's the case, why are people still receiving your gifts?"

"It's contracted out. Some firm in Asia is doing it now."

"What happened to the elves?"

60

Two-Way Santa

"Most were transferred to circuses."

"And the reindeer?"

"They were...dispatched." He gulped some whiskey.

"Hope I'm not boring you."

"Oh no! Not at all!" Indeed, I was intrigued by his ramblings, and rather taken by the man himself. He was by far the most articulate homeless person I'd encountered, and I felt a little guilty for having lumped him in with others more prosaically crazy. "So, you quit being Santa to live on the streets. That's what you're saying, right?"

"No," he said. "you're leaving out the middle."

"I am? Fill me in, then."

After yet another drink: "I was sick of the cold, so I moved to L.A. Got a job as a waiter, thinking I might get lucky with an acting career. I mean, plenty of actors have played me—but all I got were doors slammed in my face." He sighed, looked wistful. "Eventually, I landed a gig directing a string of porn films under the name Roger Wood. Ever see them?"

"I don't watch porn," I said. "Too indirect."

"Me, neither. It was just a way to make a living." I leaned forward. "but you're not directing porn now. What happened?"

"Staged sex jaded me; I tried working an office job. But I'm old and not made for the 9-to-5 grind. Couldn't take that little bastard of a boss, either. Mr. McCullough was his name."

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