

The Making of Bernie Trumble

A Fable of Man and Mutt
in a World Run by Women

Introducing Bernie Trumble, *renegade*. Born in a world ruled by women, where women direct commerce, make the laws, create the art, and dictate fashion – while frustrated males stay home to wash socks and wipe runny noses.

The Making of Bernie Trumble pits one man against the system. Bernie is an outcast because he thinks, unlike most people in his world, that males and females should have equal opportunity for growth and fulfillment. Bernie risks everything – family, friends, job, and self-esteem – in a stubborn attempt to find happiness by closing the gender gap. Maybe a transgender operation is the answer. Or maybe not.

Bernie's odyssey takes him to extremes, plunging him into one adventure after another. Like Dorothy in the Land of Oz, he meets a lot of interesting people along the way – and some of them aren't so nice. But through it all, this humorous fantasy pokes fun at the real world and gives a surprising look at gender in society, where the roles of men and women are not only unequal, but totally reversed. The result is at times sad and maddening, as the reality of gender inequality is exposed in all its nasty detail – but the tongue-in-cheek flair helps ease the pain with every guilty chuckle.

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~OTHER BOOKS~

Robert J. Wetherall has had two other books published in addition to *The Making of Bernie Trumble*.

Forever Andrew – Is 325 years old too mature for dating? Youthful-appearing, energetic Andrew Merriman discovers longevity is not without dire complications as he wanders through the centuries, across Europe, and to modern times in the United States.

Last Flight Home – A teenage Nebraska girl, born to fly, surmounts life-altering challenges while soaring to the pinnacle of the global airline industry.

Wetherall's books can be ordered at major book stores everywhere and online via:

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~AUTHOR DEDICATION~

To Ronni, who taught me strength under fire. And Sarj.

~Robert J. Wetherall

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of
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by

Robert J. Wetherall



Prologue

Sometimes even the most insignificant occurrence can trigger a chain of events that will profoundly affect history. In this story, it all began with a three-week-old field mouse munching on a Cheetos crumb in the top drawer of a laboratory desk in mid-America. How could this hungry little rodent know there would be two shocked blue eyes peering in at him through the opening drawer? One scream later, Cathy, the horrified lab assistant, dropped a flask of steaming chemicals, letting it crash to the floor, releasing its powerful contents into the laboratory.

Fumes permeated the area, blending with a batch of compounds being prepared for a new flu vaccine. In a matter of weeks, the vaccine was injected into the bodies of millions of recipients. As time passed, the altered chemicals impacted its hosts down to the molecular level, affecting genes, genomes and DNA.

Thus, seeds were sown that triggered powerful changes in human behavior. As years passed, patterns formerly prevalent among women began shifting to males – and vice-versa. Men became more communal and caring. Women became more aggressive and assertive. Traits that once consigned females to low-to-mid-level pursuits – with commensurate minimal appreciation and reward – were slowly but surely popping up among males.

Over generations, females took on the role of hunter-gatherers. Males acquiesced, becoming the helpmates, supporting and rooting for their ladies' upward mobility.

The transformation eventually moved world-wide, except for a few isolated regions: Australia's Outback, never touched by any vaccines, and parts of the Middle East, where millions of bearded men were still beating their women and making love to their camels, instead of the other way around.

Eventually science became aware of society's profound alterations and began tracking the cause to its source. The culprit was an accidental

combination of elements and was formally named Genetic Alteration Generative – referred to simply GAG.

Researchers began the task of countering GAG's progress. This work continues as our story unfolds. In the meantime, those affected try to deal with their situations, trying alternative solutions and living with daily conflicts.

Such was the world inherited by Bernie Trumble.



Chapter 1

“I would like to open this meeting by reciting some interesting facts to you gentlemen.”

The speaker was a portly middle-aged man. His deep-dyed brown hair was carefully parted in the middle, and he looked out upon his audience through thick rimless glasses perched halfway down an ample Romanesque nose. His booming voice seemed much too aggressive for the small room.

Bernie sat in the front row on a high-tech orange plastic chair, the seat of which was shaped like an ice cream scoop – into which his buns were snugly nestled. There were about two dozen men in attendance, ranging in age from their late twenties into their early fifties. Each attendee shifted nervously in his seat, and a chorus of coughs ricocheted off the walls of the room.

Over the swelling din, the speaker declared, “Maybe as I reveal these facts to you, the more studious among you will take notes, which you may later use to challenge those who take our cause lightly.

“Let us begin our revelations here at home, in our amply-blessed city of Denver, Colorado. Here we have a female mayor whose ministrations on behalf of our community are supplemented by twelve members of the city council – all of whom are also female. I point out that the chiefs of both the police department and the fire department are female as well. I remind you of the astounding fact that even our beloved Denver Broncos are managed by a female, the redoubtable Harriet ‘The Horse’ Hannigan. Her assistants wear skirts.

“Let us now widen our vision outward to the State of Colorado. Each of our duly elected senators is of the female gender. Our fair state has no governor – no, we have a *governess*! Our representatives in the House of Representatives are congress *women*. And ninety-five percent of those who serve in our own state legislature are female.”

The speaker paused to glare at the audience, as if the combined assemblage had been discovered taking part in a supreme act of foulness.

“Now, I ask you,” he voiced in a delicate whisper, “Where are the men? Where are the men, tried and true? Where have all our males gone?”

He looked intently into each face in the room, as if trying to extract an answer. Bernie felt his pulse gaining momentum.

“I’ll tell you where our men are,” the speaker declared. “They are on vacation. In fact, they are on an extended vacation that has lasted for generations. And now we – all of us – are paying the price for this little respite. We are all paying a very dear price for having abdicated – I repeat, *abdicated* – our responsibility. You think perhaps my language is a little too strong for the occasion? That I’m being melodramatic, overstating the case? *That* is what sears my soul most deeply.

“Now, there are those who say that our organization, the Male Freedom Alliance, harbors ill-will toward our female partners. Let me hasten to say that this is not true. The truth is that we are simply *pro* male. All we seek is equality among genders, so that no male shall receive less during this life simply because of his gender. And, strange as it may seem, this dream of equality between genders is no fantastic precedent – it is simply a return to the age-old past. For, though our modern history books may not reflect this, the truth is that equality among genders was achieved many generations ago.

“What brought about the demise of this happy state of affairs? It is an interesting, if depressing, story.”

The speaker stepped away from his podium and pointed to a chart perched on a three-legged easel. His trappings were decidedly low-tech, and rightly so, for the Male Freedom Alliance had no powerful financial backing.

“Let us go back to the good times,” he said brightly, “when men were in ascendance. Governmental units were created and maintained by men. Laws were created and passed by men. Commerce was held fast in the male domain. Art was wrought by male artisans. Religion was created by God – but administered by men.

“That is not to say that our female partners did not contribute to society. But their contributions were minor. Most were content to aid and support their husbands – and most accomplished this by tending to the home and family, and by supporting the breadwinner in all of his difficult decisions.

“Then a curious movement began.” He flipped over the first page of the chart, and the word ‘FEMINISM’ leaped out at the stricken audience.

“This disgusting movement began very subtly,” he said, “but it continued to grow. First there were tiny eddies and ripples as a token share of females began expressing their beliefs. Soon these small, widely separated streams of thought found common channels, and their influence grew. In the passage of a few short decades, the face of society was undergoing a profound transformation as this movement became a roaring tide.

“Mysteriously, the efforts of these feminists were aided to a large degree by the men themselves. Many males, guilt-ridden and liberal, actually supported the women’s movement – even contributed time, funds, and influence to ensure its growth.” He glanced about the room, hoping the audience would share in his overwhelming amazement at this revelation.

“Other men unknowingly helped the female cause by doing nothing. It is this group which perhaps did the most damage.” The speaker looked about the room mournfully. “These men were stupid clods,” he said softly.

“They laughed at their ladies behind their backs. They patted their ladies on their heads and patronized them in person. Worst of all, they underestimated them – and made them *mad*.

“So while these idiot males were busy watching pro football and pinching ladies’ buttocks in singles bars, the movement grew, unabated by any efforts on the part of the majority of men to dull the point of progress by giving in now and then on a few non-essential points of issue. “Before long, females were running for public office in greater numbers – and getting elected. They began taking care of their bodies physically and started outliving males, many of whom had grown soft and delicate, with flabby figures resembling bowling pins.”

Bernie looked down at his own pear-shaped physique, then looked back at the speaker anxiously.

“Women soon came into a larger share of the wealth as they outlived their spouses. And all through this, they came out of the kitchen and began taking their place in the colleges and universities. And not as teachers, mind you, but as students.

“And let’s forget all that crap about GAG. That’s a fairytale. Females have always been cunning,” he said, looking pained. “Now they’re postulating this nonsense, as if their ascendance was part of nature.

“We are gathered here tonight to face the truth. In looking

dispassionately at this sorry state of affairs, we can begin the long, treacherous trek down the road back to equality. Even as I speak to you tonight, other men are hearing similar words spoken in rooms across this nation. It may well have been too late back then for those who lost their grip on the reins. But I hasten to assure you, one and all, that it is not too late now. Acting together, with forbearance and determination, we can transform the system once again – for the common good of all.

“Now, in closing, I would like to share a personal moment with you, if I may. I would introduce you to my great grandfather, Mr. Percival Maxwell.” He pointed to a gilt-framed painting hanging off to one side behind the speaker’s platform. “I am so very proud to say that, as his great-grandson, I also carry the name Percival Maxwell. To those of you who are uninitiated into our organization, I would like you to know that it was Percival Maxwell who founded this grand fraternity, the Male Freedom Alliance.

“Unfortunately, the growth of our alliance has been painfully slow, as we lost Percival’s gallant leadership very early on. In the difficult times ahead, when seeking inspiration, you should remember Maxwell was the very first among us to offer up his life for our glorious cause. For it was none other than Percival who stepped forward at a meeting of the Women’s Feminine Caucus and issued the clarion call, ‘Let’s cut out the bullshit, Steinham – show us your tits.’ Our beloved founder was quickly set upon by the herd of females in attendance, and died a terrible but glorious martyr’s death.”

The speaker, tears streaming down his fat cheeks, stepped from the small stage with an air of triumph. He clasped the hands and hugged members of the audience who leaped to their feet and surged toward him. Although Bernie was not among those moved to embrace the speaker, he was deeply touched and overwhelmed. So overwhelmed in fact, he left a twenty-dollar bill in the collection plate which was passed among the audience before the meeting came to a close.

* * * * *

My name is Roger. I was Bernie’s neighbor for a time, and we used to be quite close. I’d like to say right now that never at any time did I personally wish any harm upon Bernie’s pointed little head. But his continual, unending

harping and carrying on about issues which most of us couldn't care less about, and his absolute refusal to give so much as one solitary inch on things that were basically unimportant, were what really brought about his downfall.

Bernie's decision – his awful 'solution' – was really the last straw, so far as our relationship was concerned. I mean, everyone, myself included, was up to here with his weird crap by that time. But I guess I'd be less than truthful if I said I wasn't just a bit flattered when he picked me to tell his pathetic little story.

We were best friends, really. But we had grown so very far apart during those final days, that our lines of communication had nearly disintegrated. I really thought we had reached the point where we wouldn't ever again share a spontaneous and honest thought. So maybe I was a bit surprised that he still thought enough of me to accord me the supreme and solemn privilege of documenting his babblings – which is exactly what most of his latest pronouncements were.

Bernie was the kind of guy who, even though he acted real humble and picked-on all the time, actually had an ego the size of an elephant's bunghole. So it figures he'd think his story was so big and stupendous that a trembling public was actually aching with anticipation to hear all about it. Such bullshit. But I'm sure his colossal Self convinced him he occupied a historical and pivotal place in this world. Talk about living an illusion.

Sure, I'll say it. He got what he deserved. He wasted years bucking a system that really didn't need it, deserve it, request it, or appreciate it. Such a sap.

Still, despite my better judgment, I miss the little guy at times, and if this crappy collection of words helps set the record straight, well, maybe it's worth it. Like I said, Bernie never did anything to hurt me – not intentionally, at least. And we did have some rather interesting, if bizarre, years together.

But the good times with him never lasted long. Sooner than later, he'd start acting strange again, and we'd have a falling out.

Bernie was always obsessed with his manhood. It was so important to him. He just couldn't be satisfied with being a person. I'd tell him (joking, you know), 'Better a live person than a dead man!' But he couldn't catch the humor of it. He'd look at me, all weepy-like, and tell me to insert it.

Then, as time went on, he started to get positively militant about

things. Christ, you couldn't talk to him for more than five minutes without him digging up the same old box of shit again. It really got to us after a while. That's why he lost it all: his family, his friends, that stupid job, his miniscule bank account. The whole ballgame – into the garbage pail.

But no, things weren't bad enough. He had to go even further. That's when he came up with this grandiose, utterly appalling idea. Surgery. What a price to pay for acceptance.

Well, let me get on with this before I get too far ahead of myself. If all of this bilge keeps just one sorry person from making the same mistakes he did, maybe this won't be a complete waste of time. And besides, it'll be like getting my daily dose of therapy. A cleansing of my soul, through Bernie's beady little bloodshot eyeballs.

* * * * *

It was one of those crisp fall days that makes Denver people call in sick at the office, jump into their mud-caked four-wheelers, and take off into the foothills that rise skyward along the western edges of the sprawling cowtown. From their vantage points above the city and suburbs, they smoked chemicals, burped Coors, and watched the curtain of smog push eastward across the flatlands.

In the brownish murk below, a nondescript man with a receding hairline and a grim look of determination wheeled his tiny car along I-70. Bernard Dalton Trumble gripped the steering wheel tightly. Beads of moisture dotted his broad forehead as he was swept along in the avalanche of traffic emptying from the freeway onto the downtown city streets.

A small tan convertible swerved out of its lane, nearly hitting Bernie's car as he pulled up to a stoplight. "Hey, asshole," yelled the blonde at the wheel of the intruding vehicle. "Why don't you stay in your own goddamned lane?" She shot him a look that could have stopped a bullet.

"I was in my proper lane," he yelled. "You almost hit me."

"You're a liar, you little pipsqueak," the woman shouted. "Either learn to drive that piece of crap, or stay home with the kids." The car sped off with shrieking rubber in a swirl of dust.

"Boy, what a mouth on that one," Bernie told his windshield. He

automatically slowed down, mindful that it was rush hour, and platoons of police would be on the road, ready to tag dull-witted motorists who had the nerve to exceed the posted speed limit by so much as one mile per hour.

Maybe that's one reason blondes have more fun, Bernie thought, remembering an ancient advertising slogan. Except for clerical help, members of the Denver Police Department were all women. And nearly all squad car personnel were blondes. Big husky blondes.

Bernie wheeled into a parking lot and dashed across the street into a towering glass-lined office building. He took an elevator to the twenty-first floor, strode down the carpeted hallway, and opened a dark wooden door with 'ANDERSON ADVERTISING, INC.' etched on a shiny brass plate.

"Anderson's waiting to see you," said the slim, dark-haired man at the reception desk. "She's really upset about something."

Bernie nodded and hurried to his office, hung his suit coat on a hanger behind the door, and dropped into his swivel chair.

As Senior Art Director at Anderson Advertising, Bernie was in fact 'senior' over practically nobody at the agency, with the exception of the night cleaning man. Judith Anderson, owner of the agency, was referred to in the business as a 'one-woman band.' She ran the company with an iron grip, deferring responsibility to virtually no one. It was a pattern of administrative behavior she had picked up from her mother, Angela, the previous owner of the agency, who had, in turn, learned her operational methods from her mother, Clarice Anderson – the founding mother of the agency.

Clarice had inherited a majority of stock in the business from her father at an important juncture in history – following the government's creation of the Equal Rights Administration. This newest government agency, created by an act of congress, was officially assigned the task of 'adjusting' certain existing administrative, legislative, financial, and social inequities which had permeated all strata of society for many years.

So it was that, upon the death of Gerald Anderson, his daughter Clarice, an officer of the agency in her own right, was given one-hundred-percent control of the firm. The administrative reins were thus passed down from Clarice to Angela, and finally to Judith.

As Senior Art Director – SAD for short – Bernie held little authority in his grasp. On accounts to which he was assigned, major decisions

concerning creative approach, positioning, style, and direction were not his responsibility. Although this made his life easier, he inwardly bristled at being thought of as merely a 'wrist' – and because his real advertising brains were not needed.

Bernie was currently assigned to an election campaign account, paired with a copywriter, Amy Dickenson. The two worked as a team on behalf of the Committee for the Election of Lindsay Martin, who was running on the Republican ticket for a US Senate seat for Colorado. As a team, Bernie and Amy worked together with easy enthusiasm. But Bernie was envious of the girl, a ravishing, fresh-faced nymph with glistening ebony hair. She was smart, hard-working, and dedicated – and she had the ear of Judith Anderson. This made her life much sweeter than Bernie's.

While her suggestions and recommendations were thoughtfully noted, registered, and documented, Bernie's were cut off with admonitions such as, "Damn it, Bernie, you're not paid to make policy, you're paid to draw!" And while Amy eased her sweet little behind into the plush leather environs of her red Alfa Romeo every evening at five, Bernie usually had to slave until after suppertime, trying to beat some life into a last-minute batch of rush layouts.

But what boiled Bernie most of all was the fact that Amy Dickenson made twenty thousand dollars more per year than he did – a tidbit he had gleaned one afternoon while casually glancing over the shoulder of Ted Dysart, the payroll secretary. The shock of the discovery triggered two events: Bernie immediately went to the bathroom and threw up, and then he marched into the office of his boss, Creative Director Megan Crawford, and asked for a raise.

Looking at his forlorn figure through her retro gold frames, Megan allowed, "Bernie, I admire you for this spontaneous outburst of courage and belief in your self-worth, however ill-founded. But my answer must be an unequivocal, resounding 'no.' I like you as a person, but as an art director, you are barely holding your own. In fact, Bernie, you are very lucky to be getting your present salary."

That incident had occurred several months ago. Since then, Bernie had not set foot inside Crawford's office. And he now lowered his head to avoid her eyes whenever he passed her in the hall.

"Miss Anderson," said Bernie into the phone, "I understand you want

to see me?"

"Yes," said a voice rich with corporate timber. "Get in here right now."

Bernie picked up a blank notepad and scurried from his cubbyhole into the elegant paneled confines of the Office of the President. Amy Dickenson was seated to Judith's left, sipping a cup of tea, offering a bright, dazzling smile that contained enough voltage to power the elevators in the office complex.

"Please sit down, Bernie," said Judith. "Bring us some coffee, won't you, Toddy?" she called to her secretary.

"Bernie," she said, getting down to business, "Amy has come up with what I think is an incredible breakthrough idea for the positioning of our candidate. Tell Bernie your idea, Amy."

"I would have talked to you about this first, Bernie," Amy declared, crossing her long legs and pulling her short skirt down modestly to cover her knees, "except that the idea came to me all in a rush, and I just had to get it out before it evaporated. So, Miss Anderson consented to hear me out."

Judith reached over and patted her shoulder.

"Sure, go ahead," said Bernie, his discomfort index gliding upward.

"Well, it occurred to me that our Miss Martin, as excellent and qualified a candidate as she is, will have to develop a real powerful issue if she's to have any effective visibility and impact on the voters. There'll be a lot of candidates shouting at once, so she'll have to take a position that's really dynamite if she's to make any kind of positive impression at all."

"Go on," said Bernie, his apprehension growing.

"Well, I've developed an issue that I really believe has what it takes."

"Tell him," Judith prodded.

"I'm calling the issue 'Gender Education Protection' – GEP, with a soft 'g.'"

The voltage in Amy's smile leaped into the mega-watt range, and Bernie almost reached into his breast pocket for his sunglasses, but thought better of it.

"It works like this," she said. "Our universities and colleges are crowded to overflowing – right? There really isn't enough space for all the people who want to obtain higher educations. So how do we assure that those most deserving and qualified get to go?"

“How?” Bernie asked, afraid to hear the answer.

“Simple. We allocate space on the basis of simple gender priorities. Let’s assume there was just one opening at Denver University in the journalism class – yet one woman and one man wanted to attend. Who would get to enroll – the woman or the man?”

Amy looked at Bernie as if she had just given him a new set of blocks to play with. “The woman or the man?” she repeated.

“I don’t know. Who?” Bernie responded, feeling a streak of yellow splashing down the center of his back.

“Why, the woman, of course,” Amy squealed. “You see, under the Gender Education Protection Act, the criteria would hold that in cases of conflict, the ‘dominant’ gender would prevail. Now, women are the dominant gender, right?”

With thinly veiled reluctance, Bernie answered, “If you say so.”

“Well, see how easy that is?” Amy cried, erupting into feathery peels of laughter. “I really think this is the kind of position that Lindsay needs to obtain visibility.” She looked at Judith for confirmation on her sound judgment.

“Precisely, Amy, dear,” cooed Judith. She turned to face Bernie with a look of stern determination. “We’ll sell Lindsay Martin to the voters as the first woman in years to tell it like it is. To demand that the dominant gender prevail in all questions relating to educational placement.”

“I don’t mean to sound argumentative,” Bernie said, “but why should anyone receive preferential treatment on the basis of gender? And how can you expect men to vote for a woman supporting a position like that?”

“Damn you, Bernie!” said Judith, rising to stand behind her massive oak desk. “Why do you always see things in such negative and simplistic terms? It is not a matter of preferential treatment; it’s a matter of seeing to it that those who will benefit the most are given the opportunity to do so in times of shortages and the like. And who cares how the men vote? There aren’t enough of you guys registered to make a damn bit of difference anyway. So don’t start in on any of your woman-versus-man absurdities – is that clear?” She glared at him, awaiting his answer.

“Yes,” said Bernie, carefully studying the elegant floral motif in the carpet.

“Now then,” she said. “I want you two to give me a whole new campaign based on GEP. You’ve got two full working days, so hop to it.”

Amy and Bernie rose to leave, but Judith raised a hand. “Amy, you go on ahead. Bernie and I want to chat a bit.”

Bernie returned to his chair as Amy left the office – her dazzling smile lighting the hallway around her.

“Now then,” said Judith, eyeing Bernie balefully. “I think it’s time you and I had another of our serious talks. Get the picture?”

Bernie nodded. The room was suddenly cloaked in silence. And the predatory constrictor glided smoothly toward the quaking little rodent.

“Now, I needn’t tell you that business has been a bit on the slow side in recent months. Our backs are against the wall, so to speak, and unless we get some decent new business in here quite soon, I’m going to have to make some adjustments.”

“I thought we’ve been busy,” Bernie said. “I’m down here working every night until seven or so.”

“If you worked faster, you’d be out of here earlier,” observed Judith sagely. “So don’t feed me that old horseshit. Now, I’d be willing to be more understanding if I thought for one solitary minute that you were actually trying – I repeat, *trying* – to play on our team. This incident of just a few moments ago is a good example of what I mean. Amy, a brilliant writer with a stunning future, gives us the kind of creative input we need to take giant strides on one of our most important and most visible accounts. Do you get in step and support her? Do you indeed even recognize a great idea when you hear it? Do you even care? No, not a whit. Not one stinking little whit.”

Bernie sank lower into his seat as the seconds ticked by.

“Sit up!” she shouted. “Don’t slump in your seat like a sulking schoolboy.”

Bernie straightened up.

“Now, here’s the way it is. Unless you show me a changed attitude – very fast – I’m going to remove you from the team and send you to the showers. If I have to make any personnel cutbacks, you’re first on the list in the art department. Got that?”

“But what about Bret Crenshaw?” Bernie protested. “He’s been here only six months, and I’ve been here for six years. Doesn’t that count for

anything?"

"I'm very glad you brought up Bret's name," Judith said, her manner brightening. "Now he's a perfect example of a valuable team player. I might also add, Bret is an extremely attractive person, dresses well, and takes care of himself. He doesn't carry one ounce of extra fatty tissue anyplace on his body. Did you know that?"

"What in the world does Bret Crenshaw's fatty tissue have to do with who's the best art director?" Bernie's voice squeaked upward in pitch, despite his best efforts to remain calm.

"It has everything to do with everything," said Judith. She waved a ring-bedecked hand at Bernie. "I like having attractive people in my presence. Have you looked at yourself lately? You, my good man, are at least ten pounds overweight. Nothing you wear matches. You look like a rag man. You haven't had a decent haircut in the six years that I've known you. And whether you personally think it's fair or not, if push comes to shove, I will take the Bret Crenshaws of this world over the Bernie Trumbles every time." She looked at Bernie imperiously, as if she had just consigned a miserable lackey to the uncharted outer limits of a vast and inhospitable kingdom.

Bernie looked back at her, a touching and sorrowful expression on his face. "But don't you agree that I am at least a better art director than Bret is? Doesn't that count for anything anymore?"

Judith gazed into Bernie's large, sad eyes. "A detail," she declared, "I couldn't care less about. Now get out of here and get to work."

He was almost out the door when he heard her call out, "Bernie, wait a sec. I noticed there were no sweet rolls in the conference room when I came in this morning. Isn't this your week to bake treats?"

"Well, yes," Bernie stammered. "But I just didn't get around to it."

"All the other men here manage to take their turns. Do you think it's being fair to them when you miss your turn?"

"No," Bernie said. "I'll bring some in tomorrow morning."

"Don't disappoint me, now," Judith said with an upbeat lilt. "I especially love your caramel nut rolls."

Bernie walked slowly out of her office and down the corridor, chin on chest, shoulders at half-mast.

* * * * *

Bernie couldn't recall the last time he had stopped in a bar for a drink after work. But on this evening, having nearly laid to rest one of the most miserable days he had ever experienced, he felt a lonely drink was definitely in order. Ann and the kids would just have to wait until the evil spirits had sufficient opportunity to work their magic upon him.

He signaled the bartender for another blueberry wine and reviewed the incredible events of recent hours. The only saving grace had occurred when Amy Dickenson approached his drawing board shortly before five and said, "I'm sorry about what happened in Judith's office."

He'd looked up at her unblemished innocence and said nothing.

"I had no idea she would react that way – like a bully, I mean. And I want you to know, I think you were right."

"How do you mean?" he remembered asking.

"About that piece-of-shit political position I created for Lindsay Martin. You're right – it is unfair, and not only would make male voters vote against her, but any thinking female voter would too."

She thoughtfully considered his surprised gape as he demanded, "Then why on earth would you propose such an issue?"

"Because, silly, I knew Judith would love it – that's why. So will Lindsay Martin, for that matter."

"You mean to stand there and tell me you don't believe in GEP at all?" Bernie tried desperately to thread his way through the illogic of it all.

"Of course not," she had said as she walked to the door. "I don't believe in all that female superiority stuff. I just act like I do because I want more out of life than what I'm getting right now." She flashed radiant three-quarter-power smile at Bernie, who shielded his eyes with an up-raised hand as she disappeared down the corridor.

Now Bernie looked around the darkened bar, noting that most of the patrons were couples engaged in laughter-filled conversations in high-backed booths and at tables set in the center of the room. All of the customers seated at the bar were women, one of whom, a brunette with flashing eyes, got up from her stool and headed in Bernie's direction. She sat down beside him and twirled an empty glass between two fingers.

“Can I buy you a drink?” she asked. “I noticed you were by yourself.”

Bernie cleared his throat. “Well, really, I was just getting ready to shove off.”

The woman, a singularly attractive specimen in a conservative soft blue business suit, smiled demurely. “One drink isn’t going to cause your split-second timetable to evaporate.”

“No, it isn’t that,” he said. “It’s just that I’ve got to get home to dinner.” Bernie rose from his stool and turned toward the door.

“Okay by me,” she said, frowning to indicate it was definitely not okay. “Only, you shouldn’t have come in here alone if you’re not interested in meeting new friends. You give out the wrong signals.”

Bernie shook his head in disgust and walked outside into the crisp Colorado evening. *Christ*, he thought, *a guy can’t even enjoy a drink in a bar without being propositioned by some horny broad*. As he walked to his car, a bent old man on a corner thrust a little pink leaflet into his face. He took the paper, jammed it into his pocket, and headed for a nearby deserted parking lot, where he got into his car and pointed it toward his home in suburban Littleton.

* * * * *

Bernie and Ann Trumble had owned their four-bedroom brick ranch home for nearly ten years. They had two children: Leslie, a perky twelve-year-old whose pretty face was usually encased in a web of bubblegum; and Cody, outwardly precocious at the tender age of seven, but who liked to chase cars when he thought grownups weren’t watching. The Trumble yard was unkempt to the point an unkind neighbor once left a note on their front door suggesting they might consider leasing their yard out as grazing acreage for cattle.

On this evening, Bernie pulled his car under the carport and walked into the warmth of the Trumble kitchen. Ann heard the kitchen door slam and met him at the open refrigerator. “How was your day?” she asked, pecking him on the forehead.

He grabbed a can of beer and popped the top. “I’ve had better. Much better, to be truthful. As a matter of fact, I kind of got into it with Judith again today.”

“Over the same old stuff, I suppose,” Ann said, a wrinkle of irritation creasing her forehead.

“I guess so.”

He slumped onto a kitchen chair and looked up at Ann. His expression reminded her of a picture of a basset hound she had seen in a recent issue of ‘Living Magazine.’ Bernie’s disappearing hairline was beaded with perspiration, and his thinning hair was mussed. His collar was open, and his bright flowered tie was pulled loose so that it hung askew, rather noose-like, below his prominent Adam’s apple. His creaseless brown pants bagged at the knees, and his heavy brown shoes were scuffed with various wounds. Her husband looked like a wreck, she observed, hurting for him.

“Why can’t you try a little harder to get along with Miss Anderson?” she said softly, laying a hand on his sagging shoulder. “It wouldn’t hurt, you know, to try harder – to go more than half way with her.”

Bernie looked up at her through blinking eyes and remained silent.

“How do the other men there get along with her? I never hear you say they’re having any problems.”

“That’s because they don’t tell her how they really feel. They’ve got pus for guts.”

“Oh, come on,” Ann said. “Maybe it’s because they know a dead issue when they see one. What’s so wrong with the way things are? Why do you have to carry the torch for some weird ideas about equality? Gee whiz, how much more equal could things be?”

“This stuff has been going on for too long,” Bernie said, ignoring the question. “Things weren’t always this way, and I’ll bet you money that things were a whole lot better off before the big changes came.”

“Hey, I’ve got a red-hot flash for you,” she said, an irritated edge in her voice. “Those ‘things’ you’re talking about existed generations ago. It was a way of life that they must have had very good reason to change, or why would they have done it? Anyway, half of that stuff isn’t even in the history books anymore – so how important can it really be?”

Bernie left the kitchen, and she followed him into the living room.

“They took it out of the history books,” he said, “because they knew it could cause them a hell of a lot of trouble someday.”

“Who is this ‘them’ you’re always talking about?” she asked.

Bernie spoke slowly, obviously trying to be patient. “The powers that are shoving this female-superiority crap down my throat, that’s who. And don’t look at me like I’m a lone voice crying in the wind. There are plenty of other people who feel like I do – men and women both.”

“Where are they?” she exclaimed. “I don’t hear any of them banging on your door, shouting encouraging words at you. I haven’t read where they’ve stormed the White House on your behalf. All I can see is you waving your arms and screaming in a vacuum, with a big story to tell that nobody’s listening to.”

She sat down beside him on the sofa and lowered her voice to a whisper. “I want you to listen to me, and listen to me extra special good. I want you to drop this whole case, file it away, and never bring it up again. It’s tearing you apart – and worse than that, it’s tearing our marriage apart. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

“Yes, but I can’t promise you anything.”

“Sit down at the table,” she said, exasperation heating her cheeks. “I’ll fix you something to eat.”

* * * * *

He ate alone while Ann watched him silently from across the dining room table. He thought about her as he munched. She was a very smart person, he knew. She had been a hard worker ever since they first became friends at the University of Denver, then became engaged and married. Now she was a very successful professional, as well as a loving mother and wife.

To her patients, she was Dr. Ann Gregory-Trumble. She had graduated first in her class of dentistry and had built a solid practice. The fact that her income dwarfed Bernie’s pitiful salary was an open matter of good humor between them, because he never begrudged her the fruits of her hard-won success, nor did he blame her for his apparent failure to grasp the golden ring himself.

The most important element they shared in their thirteen-year relationship was an abiding friendship. More than their sometimes confused feelings of love for one another, it was the easy-going, honest give-and-take of this friendship that bound them fast. It was a sharing-of-selves experience

made all the more remarkable because of its sheer simplicity, plus the enduring ability to forgive each other's imperfections – often bizarre and unpredictable, in Bernie's case.

As he munched his banana Twinkie desert, it pained him to realize that he and Ann were not as friendly as they once were. They didn't share as much as they once had. Increasingly, in recent months, Bernie was withholding – a circumstance he realized Ann knew existed but didn't comment on because they always ended up getting upset with each other. He, upset with Ann because she couldn't see the issues the way he did, and Ann upset with him because he was playing the same old, tired refrain again.

That night, he went to bed early. He didn't wait up until the kids came home. He didn't kiss Ann goodnight. He simply went to their bedroom, shut the door, undressed, and crawled under the covers. As he drifted off to sandman-land, he was suddenly jolted awake by the awful realization that he had forgotten to stop at the store to buy the walnuts so vitally needed in his recipe for caramel rolls.

* * * * *

It was mid-morning the following day when Bernie leaned back in his office chair and absently thrust his hand into the pocket of his tired suit coat to pull forth a piece of pink paper – a cheaply printed leaflet promoting the blistering message, *'To all men who seek freedom and self-respect, Male Freedom Alliance has the answer! Come meet with us in common fellowship. Share your experience with those who seek the same changes you seek. Ours is a movement whose time has come!'*

At the bottom was an invitation to attend a male gender education seminar the following evening at a downtown hotel. Bernie vaguely recalled the figure of the old man who had given him the leaflet on the street outside the bar the night before.

His musings were interrupted by a voice at his office door. "Bernie, I have to tell you, you positively outdid yourself this time." Miss Anderson leaned into the doorway, chewing vigorously and threading her words through a pulpy mass of half-masticated nut roll. "These rolls are simply marvelous."

As she turned and walked down the hall, Bernie glanced down at his

wastebasket into which was jammed the scrunched-up white box from Southside Bakery.