

Star Backwards

First Years of the Second Millennium, CE

1) Our hero waits in his van beneath a pair of giant golden arches and behind a Ford 1-50 full of surfboards and sand. There's a mess of stickers on the back of the truck but only two catch his eye. One reads: "livegrowfuckmultiplyspoilhurtperishrot" and makes perfect sense but seems far less important than the other, which says "End Dolphin Castration Now" and confuses him. This confusion might have something to do with a show he watched recently on Animal Planet during which a semi-British sounding narrator claimed dolphins are the smartest animals on earth while a piece of footage rolled over and over again showing this family of wet grinning dolphins resurfacing next to a U.S. Navy gunboat after having supposedly located and diffused an underwater land mine. But it might not have anything to do with anything. Mathias is deliriously tired.

In the last few minutes he's been sifting through a lapful of change, eyeing the two bumper stickers, and feeling like a creature from space. He's also been having an unrelated idea: why not turn each and every McDonald's into a great big vending machine?

Eliminate human error, he thinks.

Then he changes his mind. He's willing to admit that burger joints might need to hire cooks or managers, but there's definitely no need for human cashiers or drive-thru attendants. He has the vague realization that this is a billion dollar idea, one that could only be the product of genius, and thus preoccupied he has no clue how much change he has counted out

when he's distracted by the sound of a horn blowing behind him and he pulls up to the window completely unprepared.

The flat-faced Mexican girl in the window is talking to herself, Mathias thinks, or actually talking into a small microphone attached to her headset, so she doesn't notice him at first. She slips her open palm out the drive-thru window without looking. He just hands her all his money without bothering to count; much more than whatever I owe, he thinks, two handfuls. When the cashier looks up to see who it is paying all in change, she recognizes him immediately and claps her hands to her cheeks. She says something fast in Spanish and two co-workers appear behind her, a black girl with braids and another Hispanic girl wearing thick plastic glasses, both visibly excited, maybe expecting someone more impressive.

They get our hero, but they're satisfied; they've seen a face from the screen. All three girls try to say things at once and it comes out sounding like a storm of bats. Mathias flashes a smile, like he is embarrassed to meet *them*, like *they* are famous, and slides his sunglasses back up his nose. The two girls in back continue shrieking while the original drive-thru attendant hands his lunch through the window, trying to concentrate. Mathias smiles big one time and takes off, flicking a wave of the wrist but not waiting around for his change.

He had stopped at McDonald's hungry for grease, feeling depleted and woozy but oh so comfortable after leaving a hospital off Coldwater Canyon Drive in Sherman Oaks where he relieved himself of this week's plasma donation, and before that from a meeting with his producers regarding the show's imminent hiatus.

Now he's cruising on Mulholland en route to his casa in the hills, stuffing a Quarter Pounder into his face, sucking on a shake afterwards, lighting a cigarette. All the while

thinking of fast food robots. Couldn't my extra value meal just come down a little chute to my car, he asks himself. Why pay people to take orders?

“End all human contact at the drive-thru!” Mathias shouts as if in protest, bits of food falling into his lap.

He begins scrolling through the thousands of tunes on his mp3 player with a tiny wafer thin remote that also controls the DVD players and flat screens installed in the back of the headrests.

“Personally, I believe this van to be the hottest of all my whips,” Mathias practices. “It's my personal fav, my # 1 ride,” trying to decide exactly how to express himself in an original and entertaining way this afternoon when he guides an MTV camera crew through his house for a ‘Cribs’ shoot.

The ‘Cribs’ segment is scheduled to air sometime in the near future while his show is on hiatus. It's supposed to be sandwiched between a tour of Britney Spear's little sister's lake house and Carmello Anthony's palace in Denver, or possibly between a segment about Stephen Baldwin's cottage in Malibu and a houseboat with a bowling alley owned by a spikey haired dirt bike jumper. According to Mathias' agent and the producers, the ‘Cribs’ spot is one of many things in progress that will keep the show “out there”, which also means keep Mathias Canopy out there, “in the people's homes,” while he gets a much needed vacation.

His phone vibrates on the seat next to him and without looking he reaches over to click it off and drops it back onto the upholstery where it lands with a comforting, leathery thud. Recently it seems like every time he thinks his phone is turned off, it's on again. It rings all the time, like it has a mind of its own. My phone is more practical than I am, he often thinks, with

more uses: it functions as a camera, a calculator, a PDA with internet access, it sends text messages, e-mails, and it can record up to two hours of streaming audio or video. Right now it plays “Superstition” whenever it rings. Sometimes when Mathias watches the glowing digital screen dim and then turn off he feels like he’s in control of his life, but the feeling never lasts.

The plasma donation this morning was an adequate release, he tells himself, but I might still try to donate some blood sometime at Cedar Sinai if I can, already beginning to itch a little around the nose and ears. Also thinking: *Do I have a fever?* He takes a generic Valium from a bottle in the custom mid-console he had installed when the interior of the Astrovan was redone in charcoal leather and khaki suede. He hangs his head sideways out the window and sucks the stale breeze through his nostrils, his mouth hung open like a dog’s, thirsty and wishing he’d gotten a Coke instead of this plastic strawberry milkshake.

Just like regular people Mathias is only allowed to donate plasma four times a month. Once a week is the hospital’s policy, which is there “for your health” as he’s been told by both his physician and the psychiatrist he sat down with twice last year but who now exists solely as a prescription artist, catering mainly to Mathias’ Attention Deficit Disorder, off and on insomnia, and the general anxiety that is thought to be the cause of his irritable bowel syndrome. For his plasma, Mathias receives fifty dollars a visit, two-hundred dollars a month, but of course that’s not why he does it. Mathias often tells himself that he can’t *help* helping people. He firmly believes that celebrity should have a cause, or at least that’s what he’s been told and it’s seemed to make a lot of sense to him lately. Donating vital fluids is super noble, he often tells himself, and particularly unselfish.

But he also sells his sperm pretty regularly and he's been checking the asking price for his autograph on E-Bay more and more in the last few months. Currently, on a glossy "Sell Your Soul" promo: 43\$

2) Once past his security gate and the wall of bamboo around it, Mathias notices his bodyguard's black Cadillac under a Gucci hardtop with a diamond in the back parked next to a new Audi that he thinks might belong to one half his team of stylists. He pulls into the garage next to his rubber ducky-yellow Lotus and his motorcycle, stopping when the glow-in-the-dark tennis ball dangling from his garage door bounces against the windshield. He gets out and crumples the McDonald's bag over a trash can next to the garage refrigerator and lets the milkshake start to seep through before he drops it. He takes a Guinness in a draught bottle from the clear glass refrigerator - strictly for liquids - and a frosty mug from the freezer. He goes back out to the driveway to re-examine the front of his house. The front door and the flowers and the fuzzy green lawn. He spins around in slow circles. He scopes out the security gate and the bamboo wall around it, the front yard, the driveway, the facade. He is talking to himself, saying things like, "Is everything in place? Yes, everything's in place," and "All system's go!"

He walks to the side of the house and looks out over the canyon, the city, shiny billboards, swimming pools like little blue pills, empty parking lots, and gray hazy buildings with tops that seem to fizzle in the dull sky. He looks down at his backyard and peripherally at the back of his house rising up from below, basically built into a cliff. He notices movement outside on one of the balconies, but it's obscured by drawn blinds and an abundance of flowers. He scans for flaws in the pool house, Jacuzzi, the baby palms, the infinity pool and the chairs around it where X-Ray Ray is slouching with a beer and the pug Francis in a pile at his feet, having a conversation with Boner. About what? He wonders.

X-Ray Ray notices Mathias looking down on them from the front yard and waves his fat black arm, distracting Boner. Boner squints up over his shoulder and waves. Mathias just

heads straight for the front door, which until this exact moment he hasn't noticed was hanging wide open, even though he was just looking at it a few seconds ago. He enters warily.

The scent hits him immediately, something rotten, a putrid scent like a decomposing embryo that makes the stout turn to slime in the back of his throat.

“Sweet-Fucking-Christ!” He yells, his voice rising up to the skylight over the front hall. He moves on down the hallway holding his sleeve to his nostrils in disgust.

“*Hello!?!?*” he calls as loud as he can through the shirt and his forearm, but it comes out all muffled and nasally. “Who scheduled the zombie enema for the same day as my ‘Cribs’ shoot? Is this a joke? Hel-lo?”

The hallway dumps him into the dining room where he can see that the chairs are missing from around his table. Everything has been recently scrubbed and glistens with a soft dew that smells like chemicals and flowers and mixes with the foul odor badly. He shoulders the door to the kitchen - a newly installed swing door because he heard that it is favorable to hide the kitchen from the dining room (he never actually eats in his own) although he also heard that it's very chic to have the kitchen on display like an aquarium if you're eating in a restaurant and he originally considered trying to somehow go that way too. Because of his momentum when he pushes through the heavy door, he almost trips over Fernando who's on his hands and knees in the kitchen.

Fernando claps both hands to his face and squeaks, peeking through tensely opened fingers. In one hand, Mathias notices a furry-looking fleece mitten. The other hand is empty, having dropped a sudsy metal brush on the floor. Fernando cowers on over-dramatically for a moment while Mathias stares at the top of his head, quivering at crotch level.

“Waiting for someone?” he asks, taking a sip from his mug. Then, “Why are you on your hands and knees in my kitchen, you homo?”

“I’m changing a light bulb, Mathias.” Fernando limply displays his cleaning mitten and the steel brush. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“That is, um, certainly a question that could play host to a plethora of answers indeed...” he mumbles, scratching himself on the chin. “But that’s all right because what I meant to ask was: why are you on the floor scrubbing my tiles with, like...some kind of baby lamb?” He moves past Fernando and places his beer on the island in the center of the kitchen. He looks out at the sunporch, the smallest and highest of the glass rooms stacked in the back of the house. Sylvio is outside on the balcony holding a rag, surrounded by dining room chairs. Mathias sniffs the air exaggeratedly and asks, “And why does my house smell like shit?”

Sylvio walks in from the sunroom looking nervous, fooling with the rag in his hands. Fernando rises slowly. “Welcome home,” Sylvio lisps.

“Home is a state of mind. I am in it. And right now it smells like asshole, which might be potpourri to your fruity European noses, but is, um, mildly offensive to my own, *so...*”

“The stench is being dealt with this very moment,” Fernando assures him.

“Thank you. What’s the, um...source, like, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Fernando is visibly taken aback. “It’s only the number one hip-hop magazine on the planet. Come on, Mathias.”

“No, dude. The *source* of the choking *funk* that has moved into my otherwise fantabulous abode following you two flaming professional housewives.”

Sylvio moves over to the sink and rinses the rag in his hand. Then he dries and moisturizes his hands with these pads he produces from his wallet. “We are *not* housewives,

Mathias. We are artists. Designer artists in the specialized field of *style*. Artists *who*, by the way, I hope you will be plugging during this afternoon's shoot considering all the work we have done...And the smell was here before we arrived. You *must* have noticed it."

"I think I'd remember this fragrance," Mathias remarks, covering his mouth. Then he opens his arms out wide and asks, "Could someone please fill in the blanks?"

The tone of the conversation changes without a word. A knowing glance passes between Fernando and Sylvio. Fernando finally answers him in a slow voice, with caution. "It's C. Thomas Howell...We found him behind one of the flowerpots on the second level sun gallery," he spits out, then tries to clarify, his voice breaking at the edges. "*Dead.*" Both men look at Mathias with soft, watery, loving eyes.

"Listen," Mathias turns back to Fernando, angry, starting to get out of control. "The cat is not called C. Thomas Howell and the dog is *not* Young Patrick Swayze. *Please...*" He frisks himself for a cigarette, fumbles to get it out of the box. "You two are sadder than...than..." He can almost make out his reflection in their big damp eyes. He blinks twice and turns his head sideways to light up. "So, how did he die?"

Another look passes between Fernando and Sylvio. Sylvio answers gently, "We think he O.D.'d."

Mathias looks back and forth between them in astonishment. "Kittens do *not* overdose on drugs. What world do you two mo's live in? Really?"

Fernando reaches out tenderly and Mathias shoos him away with a glance. "We're sorry for your loss," he says and looks down at the wet tiles. "We found him there. He was limp. I thought he was asleep until...I touched him." Fernando shudders and brings his hand to his

mouth. “Mathias, he was already decomposing. I don’t know how long it takes a pussy cat to...”

Fernando coughs lightly. “*Rot*. But he was already doing it when we got here.”

“There were little bugs on him,” Sylvio whispers.

“I cannot believe you didn’t notice the smell earlier,” Fernando says, sort of to himself.

Mathias tries to run last week through his head but nothing actually registers.

“Believe it,” he says. And then, “So why did he O.D.?”

“He probably had some issues we didn’t know about, Mathias,” Sylvio tells him, both of them nodding.

“What are you *talking* about? How do you *know* he O.D.’d is what I am asking. How-Can-You-Tell?” Mathias pulls smoke from his cigarette, frustrated. “I’m supposed to be on fucking vacation,” he whines, exhaling a storm of smoke.

“Poisoned, Mathias. By something...Poisonous,” Fernando picks at the steel brush with his fingernails. “That was my first guess...His body looked fine except...Dead. Not like he’d been hit by an auto or mauled by a coyote. There was blood dripping from his lips. I’ve witnessed an overdose before, you know.”

“Ponyboy,” Sylvio winces. Mathias shoots him a sharp glance. His lips close tight.

“That could mean anything,” he groans, hand on his forehead. He takes a deep breath. “What did you do with the body?”

“We put him out back so we could prepare for the ‘Cribs’ shoot. He is in a trash bag behind the pool house.”

“You put Mephistopheles in a *trash bag*!?”

“Do you want us to take him out? So you can bury him?”

“Or have an autopsy performed?”

“We could design the dearest little coffin...”

“And have a funeral,” Sylvio sounds excited.

“Stop!” Mathias shakes his head. “Just throw him away.”

There’s an uncomfortable silence during which Mathias sips his beer and the two stylists play with their hands looking down. The silence is broken by Fernando, who tries to add a cheerful note onto the conversation. “The good news is that Syl and I have added some fabulous last minute touches, which we can show you if you like...” He watches Mathias nervously. Mathias raises his eyebrow and gives him a savage look, but Fernando finishes anyway. “And we took it upon ourselves to clean up a little bit, so by the time MTV gets here everything will be ship-shape, sailor.”

Mathias salutes them both sarcastically and throws his cigarette into the sink; on his way down the narrow metal spiral staircase he hears the faucet turn on and then off. “Thank you!” he yells, sounding irritated. At the second floor he pauses and looks for a second too long at the balcony, at the antique pottery full of hibiscus and bleeding hearts that jiggle in the hot wind. He notices from the sheen on the pots that they’ve just been scrubbed and so have the tiles on the floor. He moves on feeling nauseous, imagining clusters of flies.