

KID STUFF
by George Malko

Unemployed for fourteen months, Gary Meisel read a story in the trades that people his age were considered unemployable and dyed his moustache brown.

Trimmed back, it looked pretty good. But the threw the rest of him into visual turmoil, his thinning hair too pale, too gray at the temples, his skin tone pasty, his jawline sagging all to hell.

"How many people do you work on who hope to get work that's now being given to younger people?" Gary asked the plastic surgeon, pad on his knee, pen poised above the pad. It was all bullshit, this visit. There was no magazine article. He was looking to dazzle the surgeon so completely that the man would offer Gary a free make-over. It had worked once with a car Gary owned.

"Well," the surgeon said, steepling fingers and resting his elbows on the brushed sheen of his desk's pristine aluminum surface. "You can't treat people as if they were, let's say, automobiles. Replace the fenders, repaint the body, reupholster the interior and spray it with that stuff that makes it smell like a new car."

Jesus, Gary thought, he's reading my fucking mind.

The clerk in the record store finished stacking the seven CDs on the counter and said, "The very latest. It should get you going."

"Will I understand it?" Gary asked.

"Why not?" the clerk replied. Mister Rhetoric, all of a sudden.

The songs were incomprehensible. The lyrics repetitive, abusive, downright scary. Not just the threats, or the anger. Confidence rang in every word, that very certainty Gary wanted to slam on the table after he dazzled them with a breathtaking

pitch and they were all saying, "There may be something there, do you have any pages to leave behind for us to read?"

The jacket was too big. No matter what the clerk insisted. Made him look like he had two broken arms. Where the fuck were his hands, he couldn't even see them? Just the tips of his fingers, four of them.

"Do I roll up the sleeves?"

The clerk's head dropped sideways, eyes closing momentarily as his lips tightened into an O Jesus, Do I have to explain *everything?* expression.

"That was eons ago," he said. "This is the look."

"The look sucks," Gary said. But bought the jacket. And slacks that he almost called pegged though they weren't. Pleated and just very...draped. When he was a kid they called them that, drapes. Maybe go all the way and buy a long keychain to hang from the belt. Twirl for the pink-cheeked execs.

The real problem was the story he was going to try and sell. Either too violent, or not violent enough. How could he tell? Opening shot, a naked woman pleading with a guy not to shoot her. He doesn't. Just slips a stick of dynamite between her knees. She drops it, but so what? She's tied up. The dynamite is lying at her feet. Sputtering because it's lit. And the guy is walking out of the small room telling her, "See you around."

Is that what they're buying these days?

"It lacks ... conviction." The exec was young, which Gary had expected. And wore the loose suit. Except on him it looked fine. His eyes behind their oval little frames sparkled like finger cymbals, his hair had the careless look, as if he'd just trusted it to do what he wanted, or spent hours making sure. The speaker phone on his bathroom wall talking back to him while he did.

Seven in the morning, these guys awoke. Hit the rattan running. Slept in the three-point position, anticipating the snap of the ball. Loving the action, and the *idea* of the action.

"It goes to my heart and soul," the only executive Gary knew anything close to socially told him. Heart and soul, he said. Five years out of Harvard, *magna c.l.* in History, thought the business might be fun—"I think running a newspaper might be *fun*"--got a job as a reader, wrote coverage people read aloud at the Wednesday morning meetings because it made all of them feel smart. Now he's three people away from being able to green light a project. The couple of older guys—Gary's age—watching him, wondering what he presses in his palm to make all ten claws pop out. And whose ass is he going to shred first?

"Did you read my script?" It had taken Gary six months to make the first draft happen, shaping it like cherished clay, grinding passion into it like some Rodin of words. It still happened to him, three-four pages into it, and suddenly he believed in it. This was the one!

"It didn't happen for me, Gar'." Shaking his head, mourning the burden of his responsibility to be blunt. Up fucking front. "I can only be honest." Like, who asked him to add that?

So he started the new story. Forget shaping, forget cherishing. Give them what they already know they want.

But how much of it? How gruesome? How off-beat? How much would he have to make it feel as if he *believed* in it?

"Conviction?"

The kid nodded. "Something from ... here." He actually touched his heart.

"That's the only place I write from," Gary insisted.

"I don't mean you," the kid said, and rested a hand on the treatment Gary had passed over. "I mean here. By itself."

"You want the treatment to be sincere, you don't care if I am."

"Leavis," the kid said.

"Nevis?" Gary said. "You mean Nevis, St. Kitts? The story could be set there, sure."

The kid was shaking his head. "Leavis."

Gary sat up with a jolt. "F.R. Leavis? Eliot, Connolly?"

"You got it," the kid said. Not surprised Gary knew what he was talking about.

Gary surprised as hell the kid knew *anything*; trying not to show it. "So you're looking for something which works for the Objective Theory of Art." Gary leaned over and picked up his treatment. "This, you're saying, is a work of art."

"Don't you think so?" the kid asked.

"It's got nothing to do with me," Gary said. "John Crowe Ransome, Robert Penn Warren, they don't care who wrote it. Either it does it for you, or it doesn't."

"This doesn't," the lad said.

"Cleanth Brooks," Gary said.

"You got it," the kid said, like it was about Eisner and Disney.

"And deconstruction?"

"Doesn't apply."

"That's not what they were saying at Paramount."

For a fraction of a second, the kid moved, started to sit up. His eyes blinked, a silvery crash of the tiny cymbals. "You're making that up," he said.

"Leavis," Gary said, getting up, still holding the pages of his treatment. "Have you ever lectured?"

The kid shook his head.

"You'd be good," Gary said.

He wangled a meeting with his Harvard friend and told him all about his F.R. Leavis pitch meeting. "You know where he gets that, don't you?" his friend asks.

"I don't give a shit where he gets it," Gary said. "What does it mean?"

"Nothing," his friend said. "Ignore it. What happened to your arms?"

"The North Bowl at Vail," Gary lied. "Both arms dislocated."

His friend was shaking his head. "Vail is out. Colorado is out."

"This was before they voted on that thing," Gary said.

"We all saw it coming."

"You see everything coming," Gary complained. "You want to hear my story?"

His friend said, "Is it about a family, with the kids learning values through gentle conflict?"

"It's about a woman with a stick of dynamite up her cooz."

Gary's friend winced. "Wrong."

Gary stood up. He was always standing up. "Everything I do is wrong."

"You're a writer," his friend said. "Comes with the territory."

"Coin of the realm," Gary added.

"No," his friend said. "Not for one moment."

He registered a new name for himself with the Guild, Chip Ransome. Then had his agent fax his treatment all over town. "No meetings," Gary told him. "They want it, they get to meet me. Not before."

"Animation?"

"It's hot," his agent said.

Gary shifted the phone from his right hand to his left and poured himself more iced tea. "I don't write cartoons."

"They want you."

"Why, for Christ's sake?"

"Eisner," his agent said.

"Disney?" Suddenly scared, as if his agent might invoke Cleanth Brooks.

"Will Eisner. I looked up your early credits. You once wrote a story line for *The Spirit*."

"I was a kid, he let me hang around. I thought I was Denny Colt."

"Don't know him," his agent said. "But you, these guys think you're a legend."

"Cartoons." He needed more iced tea. Something.

"They made an offer."

"For what?"

"The treatment. They see a musical."

Chest muscles do funny stuff under stress. There's this involuntary constriction that happens. Esophageal reflex. The heart starts to hammer. Around it, across the back, muscles are jumping. "The stick of fucking dynamite? With *music*?"

"These guys are pushing the envelope."

They sat on the floor around him. At his feet. The writing would come later, they said. They wanted to hear about the glory days of comic books. So he told them.

He never wrote a word. Five weeks later, the checks coming in on time to his agent, it was over. They knew everything he knew, had relived his moments, laughed, clapped one another on the back as the great old stuff happened all over again. Not for him, for *them*. In front of his eyes. Five weeks of good money, and then they shook his hand and said it had been great. They'd never forget it; not a word, not a nuance.

They meant it.