



Tales of campus life, Part 3

'I should just keep on walking...'

I didn't have much farther to go. Just a few scant yards across the puddled concrete of the EMU terrace and I would be safely within the fishbowl. I could see it now: I'd pick up a paper, scan the personals, drink some coffee, watch the chess players, snag a passing friend, shoot the breeze, and maybe sneak a peek at The Guiding Light in the TV room to see if Peggy ever found out that Roger was the father of Holly's baby. Just a few more feet...

By BRAD LEMLEY

"Scuzemecouldjasparesafewmomentatalkaboutthespremespargus?"

I should just keep on walking, I told myself, and pretend that I hadn't heard anything. That's what I should have done, but I knew that I couldn't. Ever since I had read Milton's "Areopagitica," which pointed out that one could learn the truth only by exposing himself to all possible viewpoints, I had been a sucker for these campus pitchmen. So far, stopping and listening to them had been about as enlightening as a Sgt. Bilko rerun, but then again there was always the slight possibility that I might stroll right past the bearer of the Ultimate Truth and always be the poorer for it. I stopped.

"Uh, what was that?"

The man's stubbled face split into a gap-toothed smile.

"The Supreme Asparagus," he said, leading me out of the flow of traffic. A few passers-by cast sympathetic looks in my direction; it was the same sort of expression that I imagined the surviving members of a school of fish wore when one of their number was snagged by a merciless angler.

"I will tell you a story," the man was saying. "I will tell you why all the great religious leaders of the world secretly sacrifice pellets of fertilizer at the altar of the Supreme Asparagus. I will tell you how John Lennon uses the hubcap of a 1937 Hudson Terraplane to carry out the Supreme Asparagus' wishes. I will tell you how the Supreme Asparagus annoints the tips of neophyte disciples with the Hallowed Hollandaise. I will tell you how the Supreme Asparagus knows if you are a true believer, how he knows if you have faith, how he knows if you are sleeping, how he knows if you're awake, how he knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness..."

"Hey, hold it a minute," I said. "Now I recognize you, you talked to me last week about the Omnipotent Potato. But you looked different then, you were wearing Sears cotton sheets and blue Pumas and this week it's..."

Penny's percale and waffle stompers—the official garment of the Grand Cultivator of the Supreme Asparagus," he said proudly. "The Omnipotent Potato proved himself to be unworthy and was consumed in the Vegetable Armeggedon last Thursday."

I sighed—Sgt. Bilko was Socrates compared to this fruitcake. "So what's the going contribution rate on this super artichoke," I asked resignedly.

"Please—the Supreme Asparagus," said the man, extending a coffee can. "And one may invoke the blessings of the Exalted Stalk for just one dollar."

I pulled a bill out of my pocket, tossed it in the can and headed for the door. The coast looked clear. Maybe, just maybe...

"Hey comrade give all power to the people free political prisoners get pigs off campus fight repression stifle censorship abolish the CIA recall Boyd ban the bomb free Palestine boycott scab lettuce back the CCDC control oil profits liberate Angola resist the tuition hike support Newton Chisolm Nader Castro Davis Ervin Leary Kesey Harris Ginsburg Bond Abzug Mao Teng down with Nixon Ford Rockefeller Kissinger Wallace Reagan Buckley Goldwater Connally Mitchell Schockley and destroy the bourgeois fascist militaristic capitalist anti-expressionist slave holding imperialist war-mongering oligarchic bureaucracy."

"Do I have to do it all before lunch?" I asked.

"The time for action is now, comrade," said the man. He was wearing a beret, a mustache and goatee, a black turtleneck, a tattered khaki jacket, 14 P.O.W. bracelets, a gun belt, canvas pants and combat boots. "The enemy is nearly upon us. And with the new development, we can scarcely hope to hold out."

"Uh, what new development?" I asked, against my better judgment.

"An FBI plot, my friend," said the man, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Our agents forced the story out of Jack Ford by holding back his marijuana fix until he went into withdrawals."

"Inhuman!" I asserted.

"But necessary," he responded, "especially in the light of the seriousness of the counter revolutionary plan. It seems that Ella Fitzgerald has been enlisted to sing an ultrasonic note during the national anthem at the next Blazers-Lakers game, which will cause Bill Walton's ankles to shatter and send him to the Mayo Clinic, where Angie Dickenson, disguised as a nurse, will lure him into an affair, using tactics the CIA taught her back in '60. A photo of them in bed together will cause Angie's husband, Burt Bacharach, to get a divorce and marry Tatum O'Neal, whom he has been secretly dating. Jackie Kennedy, Burt's other secret love, will be so enraged that she will marry Elton John out of revenge, who will drop out of the record industry and manage Ari's shipping fleet, leaving Bernie Taupin to team up with Frank Sinatra, who will go broke and move in with Bob Hope, who will soon grow sick of Sinatra and marry his long-time mistress Marie Osmond, which will enrage the entire Mormon population, at which time Dick Tuck will spread the word that Marie's move was prompted by left-wing radicals. The Mormons will use the interest on their tobacco holdings to buy the U.S. Army and bingo—no more people's resistance."

"That sounds serious," I said. That sounds ridiculous, I thought.

"But we're preparing," the man assured me. "We're putting together our own private army of public relations men who will cut off Tuck's message and spread the word that the military-industrial complex is the guilty party in Marie's abduction. We're receiving contributions for the army right now."

"Which average...?" I sighed.

"Just one dollar," he said, extending a coffee can. I tossed in the bill, squatted down into a three-pointed stance and made a mad dash for the door, but something flew into my path. Going too fast to stop, I slammed into some kind of floating metal object and fell back on the concrete, dazed.

"Hey, didn't anyone ever tell you that running burns up precious oxygen?"

I looked up toward the voice and saw a young woman sitting in a bright orange Navy hovercraft which was floating about four feet off the ground. The vehicle was saucer-shaped, about six feet in diameter and incredibly noisy.

"Excuse me...I think," I said, still a bit groggy.

"And look at you!" shouted the woman over the hovercraft's scream. "There you are, standing on the ground like it's the most innocent thing in the world."

I looked down at my Roots self-consciously.

"Uh, isn't it?"

"Of course not!" bellowed the woman. "Why do you think I'm sitting in this thing?"

"To be perfectly frank, I really don't..."

"I'll tell you why!" she yelled. "It's because every time you put one of your big feet on the ground you squash thousands of endangered microorganisms. Did you know that the Dicomoneriphra is nearly extinct?"

"Uh, no. Should I?"

"If you value your life you should. Humanity is just one link in the global food chain and Dicomoneriphra is the basis of it all. Besides, could anything be more beautiful than a family of Dicomoneriphra taking an evening stroll across a 1000X microscope slide? And there you stand, killing them!"

I was going to make some sort of reply in my defense, but by then the exhaust fumes from the hovercraft had filled my lungs, and I sank to my knees, coughing.

"It's no use praying for forgiveness," she told me, "when you kneel you just kill more of them. You can help,

though. I'm the local emissary of the Commission on Reviving and Uplifting our Microscopic Brothers, and we're going to construct a giant system of elevated walkways all over the world so that the earth can be left to the microbes. After all, they were here first."

"This system of walkways," I began, "how much is the average..."

"One dollar," she said, pressing a button on the hovercraft's console. A hatch opened in the side of the vehicle and a metal arm reached toward me, holding a coffee can. I plunked in four quarters, the arm retracted, and the woman and her craft zoomed over the hedge and out of sight.

I was steamed. To hell with the "Areopagitica," I thought, I'm going to quit being an easy touch for any two-bit activist who stakes out a square on the terrace. I paid my fees, I told myself angrily, and nobody, but nobody is going to keep me from opening that door and going in—

"Excuse me."

That did it.

"Listen, you crummy little half-baked Bolshevik!" I roared. "Let me tell you what I believe! I believe that there is some sort of Supreme Being who has or had some sort of existence, but I do not know what form He, She, or It takes or took, or where He, She, or It lives or lived, or anything about He, She or It other than whoever or whatever the Supreme Being is or was, I'm sure that He, She, or It doesn't or didn't want a platoon of peyote chewers and vegetable gardeners trying to pass off everything from Astrology to zucchini as the Ultimate Answer. Politically, I am a liberal Democrat, and I believe that capitalism is an unjust system and that the wealth in America should be distributed more evenly—as long as I can be guaranteed that my wealth isn't divided up first. And as for ecology, I signed petitions for preserving French Pete and stopping seal killers and whale harpooners, but as for amoebas and paramecium I just don't give the contents of a waste vacuole. So as far as I'm concerned you can take your pamphlets and your buttons and your coffee can and..."

"Hey, wait a minute," said the figure at whom my tirade had been unleashed. She was a tall, fair-skinned woman, and I suddenly realized, she was not wearing a beret, buttons, or even an oppressed expression. "That's an interesting set of priorities you've got there, pal," she said, "but all I really wanted to know is where I can find the TV room. I'm new in town, and I haven't seen The Guiding Light since I set out from New York last week. I've really been worried because God, if Peggy finds out about Roger and Holly..."

"... she'll probably tell Ed and he'll start boozing again," I said. "Hey, I'm sorry about that outburst, it's been a long morning."

"Oh, that's okay," she said as we strolled into the TV room. "But you're wrong about Ed, he'll probably just drop Holly and move back in with Janet."

"Maybe," I conceded. "As the man outside would say, it all depends on the Will of the Supreme Asparagus."

The woman's face brightened.

"Oh, wow, are you an Asparagusophile too?" she squealed, pulling a bundle of stalks, several jars of hollandaise and a '54 Buick hubcap out of her backpack. "That's incredible, I didn't even know they had a parish out here. If you've got some fertilizer with you we could do a sacrifice right now — I'm afraid I used all of mine up at the Final Rite of Omnipotent Potato and I haven't had a chance to get more, what with traveling and everything."

"I haven't got any fertilizer," I muttered.

"Oh, that's okay, they sell special sacrificial packets at a garden shop on 13th. Each packet has enough fertilizer to conduct a Chlorophyll Catechism, and they only cost..."

"One dollar," I muttered, flipping a bill into the hubcap.

"Yeah, how did you guess?" she said, snatching up the money and heading for the door.

"Just a shot in the dark," I mumbled at her retreating form. I leaned back, sighed, and watched an out-of-focus housewife sing a lilting serenade to her diswashing liquid. Next time, I resolved, I'm coming in through the post office. *

