

CHRISTOPHER LARGEN

JUNK



ENC Press



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excerpt

Moe Goodman flinched as the studio-sanitized theme music blared behind him, and the houselights dimmed.

A pre-recorded choir chanted, “Praise Him, praise Him, praise His holy name!”

Two spotlights searched the stage, bouncing and swirling before they landed on the host.

Farah immediately broke into character, bowing her head and clasping her hands in public prayer. The music faded and she lifted her head to face the studio audience. “Praise God, and welcome to *Faith Vibe*,” she said, “where religion and politics intersect, and we take on the important issues facing our divine nation! I’m Farah C. Forbes, and our distinguished guests this evening are Reverend Moe Goodman, a Denton-based minister and junk food addiction counselor, and Pastor Rick Smith, a liberal theologian at New Life Church in Dallas. Welcome to the show, gentlemen. Hallelujah!”

The applause light flashed, and the studio audience complied with a rousing thunderclap ovation. Moe thought it might have startled Jesus himself. He tried not to roll his eyes as he smiled, and mustered his social graces to nod feigned thanks to the assembled mob.

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Farah continued, on cue: "Tonight we're here to discuss the controversy surrounding the classic book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. As some of you may be aware, angry parents have banded together, organizing grassroots boycotts of local stores that carry copies of this book or of the movies it spawned. They claim the plot promotes youth delinquency, and they're calling for a formal municipal ordinance banning the material from city limits."

Farah swiveled toward Moe like a well-lubed cannon. "Reverend, you've been a stalwart soldier in the war on junk, and your efforts have brought accolades from across the state. Where do you stand on this book?"

Moe grinned. "I try not to stand on it at all."

The audience responded with obligatory chuckles.

"But seriously," Moe said as he held up his hand, "I read it several times when I was young. And I'll admit, I enjoyed the story, the characters. Even the movies weren't bad. But that deceptive charm is exactly what makes them so dangerous."

"Really?" Farah asked eagerly.

"Absolutely. Behind its thin veil of childish innocence, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* contains subversive messages, subliminal ideas that subtly undermine the hard work of our ministers and police officers."

"How so, Reverend?"

"Think about it. On the one hand, we advise kids to stay away from candy and other junk. We go so far as to threaten them with arrest. Then they plop down and read Charlie, a story with very young children indulging in junk abuse from beginning to end. A kid goes swimming in chocolate. Addicted children lick sugarcoated wallpaper. A soda drink makes Charlie so euphoric, he flies way up in the air."

Farah clicked her tongue and shook her head.

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“Well, I can understand why parents are concerned.”

Pastor Smith leaned forward in his chair and began to shake his foot hyperactively. “Now hold on a sec, Reverend. With all due respect . . . you don’t honestly believe the author of this work intended to hurt young people, do you?”

Moe thought a moment. “No, of course he didn’t intend it. But he was negligent. He didn’t think about these kids.”

“Sure, I’ve heard this all before. It’s the slippery-slope argument your type likes to use. The problem is, you’re taking this out of context. You aren’t telling the viewers that candy and cake were legal when Charlie was released.”

“So were burgers and snack chips, for that matter, and a lot of other garbage. But just because the law says something’s right or wrong, doesn’t make it so. Times have changed. If we want children to avoid the perils of junk food, we need to be sending consistent messages. We have to model the behavior we want them to exhibit. Otherwise these kids will think we’re hypocrites.”

Pastor Smith snickered. “Well, I’ve got news for you. Despite the Reverend Goodman’s arrogant attempt to play God, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is actually a sublime Christian allegory.”

Farah leaned forward and smiled. “Oh? Do tell.”

“It’s simple . . . the Chocolate Factory represents the Kingdom of God, with Wonka as Supreme Being. In order to enter the kingdom, the Bible says, you must become like a child. So, Wonka has to find a kid to inherit his factory.”

Moe chuckled. “Oh, please. Spare us the muddled metaphors, Pastor.”

“Wait, there’s more . . . The children who find golden tickets embody the deadly sins. Augustus Gloop, of course, is Gluttony. He gets sucked into a chocolate-filled pipe, a victim of his vice. Violet

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Beauregard is Pride. She's always showing off her gum-chewing skills, so she blows up like a blueberry—blows up with pride. Veruca Salt is Greed—she wants it now, and gets a one-way ticket to Rotten Eggsville. Mike TV is Sloth. He just wants to sit in front of the tube. So he becomes miniscule—he atrophies down to a speck of his former self. And Charlie is Envy. In abject poverty, he desires the comfort and security that more affluent families possess.” Pastor Smith folded his hands in his lap and smirked.

Moe opened his eyes wide. “But that’s only five children. You’re missing two sins. You can’t forget Lust and Anger.”

“That’s a technicality.”

“What? It ruins your whole theory. If you’re going to make the comparison, at least have a little integrity.”

“Excuse me?”

Moe thrust his fingers in the air to count. “You need seven. You only have five.”

“No, the allegory’s perfect. Can I please finish my point? Now, Wonka runs his own Garden of Eden in the bowels of the factory. Remember the room where you can eat everything? The Everlasting Gobstopper is the one forbidden fruit in Eden. Of course, the gobstopper represents the apple of the Tree of Knowledge.”

Moe threw up his hands and rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

“Charlie almost bites that bitter fruit, but at the last minute gives the gobstopper back to Wonka instead. Charlie’s genuine repentance is rewarded by Wonka, who bestows upon him the coveted keys to the kingdom.”

Moe pointed at the pastor. “Aha! You overlooked the man who tries to convince the children to steal the gobstopper from Wonka, I forget his name . . .”

“You mean Slugworth.”

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“Yes, him. Just how does he fit into your wacky Wonka cosmology?”

“Easy, Reverend. Slugworth is the devil.”

“How can you say that? In the story, Slugworth works for God—uh, I mean Wonka.”

“But just as Slugworth is revealed to be Wonka’s valued employee, the devil actually works for God.” Pastor Smith triumphantly pounded his fist on the arm of his chair. “Slugworth’s role is to test the spiritual fortitude of the potential heirs.”

Moe slapped his knees. “That’s blasphemy! We’re talking religion and politics here, Pastor. Not creative writing.”

Pastor Smith sneered. “Your veiled insults don’t affect me.” He shook his finger at Moe. “Sticks and stones, Reverend! And he even has his chosen people, the Oompa-Loompas, whom he took under his benevolent wing to protect them from persecution by Hornswagglers and Vermicious Knids.”

Moe grabbed the arm of his chair. “That’s patently offensive, Pastor, and you know it!”

“But it’s true. The Oompas speak in proverbs, they have a distinct culture and unique appearance. They even helped Wonka maintain his temple, the factory. Doesn’t that sound Jewish to you?”

Before he could catch himself, Moe rose, shouting, “I’ve had it up to here with this blasphemy, you’ve gone too far! Were you high on sugar when you cooked up this rubbish? You’re giving me one serious case of indigestion!”

Now Pastor Smith stood, yelling, “God’s forgiving nature is manifested and revealed through the character of Wonka! Don’t you see? Every kid who abuses food gets destroyed, a natural consequence of sin. But Charlie inherits Wonka’s kingdom precisely because he can resist the urge to eat the gobstopper. The film is

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anti-junk! It would be tragic and senseless to keep children from getting the Christian message of this sanctified tale.”

Moe pointed his finger at Pastor Smith. “That’s manipulative, and you know it! Sure, Charlie returns the gobstopper, but he winds up with the factory itself! This young boy goes from experimental use to full-scale production and distribution in the bat of an eye!”

Pastor Smith shrugged and turned to the stunned host, who looked up from her chair with fear. “Well Farah, I guess he just made my point for me. Everybody in this world sees things in their own way.” He looked at Moe and sneered. “God made individuals, not automatons. That’s why censorship doesn’t work. And besides, the laws outlaw junk food—not books and films about it.”

“The law isn’t always just, Pastor. Maybe we need a new law.”

“That’s what your type always says, a new law. Isn’t it enough that Charlie has a parental advisory sticker? What more do you want? You fanatics already made PBS remove Cookie Monster from the *Sesame Street* lineup. You should’ve been happy with him being on a low-carb diet, but no! You just couldn’t stand having the furry blue guy around anymore, could you? If parents don’t want their children reading a book, they shouldn’t buy it for them. Same goes for the movies. But don’t tell my family what to do, Reverend . . . Goody Two-Shoes!”

The *Faith Vibe* producers should have seen it coming, but they were too late to prevent Moe from lunging at Pastor Smith and shoving him down on the stage.

The audience responded with horrified gasps and random shouts.

Moe leapt through the air to pounce on the prone pastor.

The pastor rolled to the side.

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Moe landed on his hands and bad knees, wincing and groaning.

Pastor Smith jumped on top of Moe, wrapped his hands around his neck, and throttled him, banging his head into the floor.

Moe tried to catch his breath while dodging drops of spittle from the pastor's trembling, twisted lips.

Pastor Smith screamed maniacally.

Moe's head jerked up and down, and he swore to God his first time on television would be his last.

A flustered studio technician signaled for security, and accidentally bumped the applause button in the process. The audience roared in submission, while several people in the front rows threw their hands in the air and began to speak in vigorous tongues.

Farah signaled the main cameraman to zoom in for a close-up of Moe and Pastor Smith brawling. She lifted her producer's headset and whispered: "It's a wrap. This may have been just the ratings boost we needed!"

Farah pranced into the spotlight with orgasmic delight and shouted, "All things work together for the good of those who love Jesus! It looks like we're gonna have to wrap up early today, folks. Please support our ministry and become a Christian soldier by purchasing your very own G.I. Jesus action doll from the 1-800 number at the bottom of your screen. Your friends will marvel as they admire our Lord's camouflage parka and cast-iron M-16! Be sure to tune in to *Faith Vibe* next week, same time, when we'll discuss the horrors of fetal-tissue research. I'm Farah C. Forbes, and as always, remember—if you die before me, be sure and tell God I say hello!"

These words were the last Moe heard before being knocked unconscious by Pastor Smith's hardcover pocket version of the New Testament.

FORT WORTH RESIDENTS PROTEST HALFWAY HOUSE

by Kelly Snell, Associated Press writer

FORT WORTH, TX—City residents are circulating a petition that opposes a home in the area being used as a halfway house for people who have been convicted of food-related crimes.

Cathy Better, the principal at Eastern Hills Elementary School, is supporting a petition that already had 80 signatures on it Thursday afternoon. She said there are several parents circulating similar petitions in shopping malls, at Lion's Clubs, and at Tupperware parties.

Said Better, "When I heard about the plans for the halfway house, I was really concerned about having those fat people within a block of the school. I mean . . . we're trying to teach our children to stay away from toxic foods! What kind of message does it send when our kids are forced to look at all this lard?"

Ted Walkins, who is leasing the disputed property, told the city commission that the halfway house is intended for people who have recently graduated from a food-abuse or residential treatment program.

"I don't see it as a threat to the community at all," said Walkins. "We haven't caused any problems. We're trying to create a clean, structured environment for people working on becoming productive members of the community. Many of these offenders were already evicted from their apartments after they were arrested. They need somewhere safe to go. If they aren't given any options, they'll have no place to turn but the street, which would increase the likelihood they'll make unhealthy and illegal dietary choices for themselves. Believe it or not, junk food addicts are people, too, just like you and me. Mrs. Better can cloak her rhetoric in moral platitudes all she wants, but the truth is, she's acting like a bigot, plain and simple!"

However, Better is committed to her cause, and she won't back down from criminals and food-abusers. "My concern is that in our neighborhood we

have to keep our doors locked as it is," said Better. "We already have strange-looking people wandering around, and we don't need to add to that problem. They're all bad, but the caffeine addicts are the worst. They'll rob people at gunpoint to get cash for coffee. We don't want food-related crime in our neighborhood!"

Better said that young schoolchildren regularly walk on the very street where the home is located. She believes safety is a legitimate concern. Better also reported that the neighborhood has experienced a recovery, with consumers buying older houses and restoring them. "We want our neighborhood to be a nice place for decent families to live, not a haven for bloated abusers. If we let these kinds of people move into our neighborhood, the property values will drop. That's not fair to the thousands of respectable residents who pay enormous property taxes, mow their lawns regularly, and obey the laws of our land. Not to mention that most of us are parents, and the law requires that we take adequate steps to protect our children! We're not saying these recovering junk food junkies don't have any rights. We just want to ensure our wishes are taken into account by the zoning board."

Better claims, however, that she has no personal animosity toward junk food abusers. "I'm not prejudiced. Some of my best friends are friends with friends of friends of people who are fat, um . . . challenged by gravity, I mean! I wish we didn't even need the petition, to be honest. This whole issue could be resolved if these abusers would just find another neighborhood to live in, one that's more fitting for those types."

The Cowtown Tattler, 1/13

Billy Sweet lounged on a lakeside bench next to Smitty. A gentle wind tempered the blistering sun as birds soared and dipped into the water for a quick meal. Billy and Smitty seemed oblivious to the monolithic wooden gingerbread man that loomed behind them, five stories tall, painted to look as if it was garnished with sticky frosting.

Billy elbowed Smitty. “Hey dude, you think you could knock it off? The bench is vibrating. I feel like I’m in a milkshake blender.”

Smitty stopped bouncing his leg. “Sorry. I got the jitters.”

Billy stretched his arms toward the sun. “Must’ve been that chocolate pudding you scarfed down earlier. I got no pity for you . . . Ever been to Lake Grapevine before, Smit?”

Smitty shook his head. “Not since I was young, and I don’t remember a thing, I was stoned outta my head. But I’m glad I came. It’s gonna be one hell of a party!”

Billy moaned. “I told you, Smitty. Stop calling it that. This is legit! It’s the first Burning Gingerbread Man festival we’ve ever had in Texas.”

Smitty waved across the swarming crowd to the broad stage, where a punk-rock band decked

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out in leather space-alien costumes lunged and gyrated. The lead singer stood on high stilts, grunting and gurgling his way through a metallic manifesto titled "Eat Shit and Die."

Smitty chuckled and said, "You hear this music? It's a party alright."

A few seconds passed before a muscular, bald man approached the bench. He had hoop earrings in both ears and a Tasmanian Devil tattoo on his calf. The bald man looked away into the crowd, then pointed several times toward Smitty.

Billy thought this was strange. He was about to comment on it, when a male uniformed police officer approached Smitty and hovered over him.

The officer asked, "What're you doing?"

Smitty looked at Billy, then at the officer. "What do you mean? I'm just sitting here."

The officer rolled his eyes. "Uh-huh. You know we saw you bouncing your leg. Are you on sugar?"

"Not me. I shake all the time anyway. Nervous habit, that's all. The doctors think I'm hyper."

"You got anything on you I should know about? Guns? Knives? Bombs? Corn chips?"

"No sir."

"Then I suppose you won't mind emptying your pockets so I can verify that."

Smitty raised his hands defensively. "Whoa! Wait a minute! I wasn't doing anything."

Billy stood up from the bench and looked the officer in the eye. "He has rights, you know. I've got friends who are attorneys, Officer . . ."

"Sergeant. Sergeant Belcher."

"Whatever . . . The law states you can't search him without probable cause or a warrant, 'cause he sure as hell ain't gonna give consent."

Belcher glared at Billy. "I don't need his consent. He was engaged in suspicious behavior. A bouncing leg's probable enough cause for me."

Smitty crossed his arms. "I'm not moving."

Belcher pointed at Smitty. "All right, let me

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put it this way. If you don't empty your pockets, I'm gonna haul you to jail."

Smitty chuckled nervously. "Well it sounds like you want to take me in anyway."

Belcher nodded. "Yeah, that's about right."

Smitty rocked back and forth, sweating and shaking. He glanced over at a large metal trashcan standing right next to the bench. "Give me a minute to think about it?"

Belcher stepped forward and reached for his cuffs. "Sure. You can think about it while I take you to jail."

Smitty quickly stood up, thrust his hand into the pocket of his jeans, and yanked out three peppermint nips. He chucked the nips in the trashcan before the officer could snatch them from his grasp.

Belcher leapt behind Smitty and placed him in a chokehold.

Smitty sputtered as he tried to pull the officer's arm away from his neck and restore his airflow.

Belcher threw Smitty to the pavement and pounced on top of him.

Smitty screamed and pounded the concrete with his fist. "Oh God! I think you've broken my leg!"

The tattooed bald man knelt down in front of Smitty, holding a small plastic device. Billy thought it might be a digital camera.

The bald man pressed a button. The device made a hissing noise, spraying Mace in Smitty's face.

A young girl froze in place near the assault, gazing at Smitty with frightened eyes as his shrieks filled the air.

Smitty could hardly breathe. He gagged on the Mace, and his nose started running. The uniformed cop cuffed him so tight he thought his wrist bone might crack.

Random citizens in the crowd started shout-

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ing: "HELP! SOMEBODY CALL AN AMBULANCE!"

Billy approached the bald, tattooed man, tapped him on the shoulder, and pleaded, "Hey, what're you doing? Who are you? Leave him alone!"

The bald man responded like a sumo wrestler on raw sugar. He spun around and yelled, "I'm a cop!"

Billy stepped toward him. "Well, I don't see a badge."

The bald man frantically tore at his own shirt, whipped out a badge, and spat at Billy as he screamed, "Don't touch me! I'm a cop!"

Billy looked down at Smitty, whose grimacing face was inflamed, wrinkled, and covered with tears and mucus.

Smitty cried out, "I want my mommy!"

Billy felt like he wanted to sob and vomit at the same time.

A young guy standing right behind Billy barked, "Move out of the way!"

Billy snapped back, "I'm not moving. He's my friend!" Then he turned and noticed the guy was clutching a video camera. Billy pulled away quickly, mumbling, "Oops, sorry!" At the moment, this cameraman was probably Smitty's best friend in the world.

Billy squatted down to ask Smitty the obvious: "You okay?"

"No, I'm not," Smitty reported. "My eyes are burning and I've got snot running out of my nose."

Billy stood up, yanked off his T-shirt, and leaned over Smitty.

Belcher thrust his arm forward and shouted, "Don't touch his eyes!"

"I just wanna get the snot off his lip, man."

Billy wiped Smitty's face as the officer lunged for him and missed.

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Belcher shouted, "That can make it worse, if you rub it around. Leave, now!"

Billy started to walk away when he heard Smitty scream again.

As a junk food manufacturer, Billy had learned to keep a level head in desperate situations, but now he felt he could not remain quiet. He believed his silence would be a passive acceptance of barbarism. He wanted these officers to know that feral behavior by public servants was not acceptable. He made his choice in one breath.

Billy's lips trembled as he turned, looked right at the bald undercover officer, and shouted, "This is America? He's not an animal! He's a human being!"

The bald man tilted his head, shrugged, and said, "Why do you think we've activated medical response?"

Billy said, "I know why. 'Cause you just sprayed chemicals on an unarmed, nonviolent citizen. Doesn't look too good on the evening news—or in a court of law. Know what I mean?"

The bald cop sneered and turned away.

Several agitated patrons moved toward the area where Smitty lay. The crowd was swelling under the scorching sun.

Billy noticed the punk band had stopped playing. He heard random shouts fill the humid air.

"Go after the bad guys! Go catch a terrorist!"

"Nobody invited the cops here! They should go home!"

"This was a peaceful event!"

"We just went from candy to pepper spray? I feel safer already!"

Billy turned and pushed through the crowd and made his way toward the stage. He looked up to see Fat Teddy poised, lurching, grasping a microphone, yelling with all his might. Billy thought he looked like Santa Claus with his rolling belly, flowing silver beard, mad-scientist hair, and rainbow-colored suspenders.

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Fat Teddy shook his finger and spat in the air. The acoustics were terrible where Billy was standing, and Teddy was shouting so fast Billy could only make out the words “pepper spray” and “liberties.” Billy didn’t mind. He knew he was witnessing a legend in action, an outspoken advocate of food-policy reform.

Fat Teddy’s voice echoed across the pavilion, and this time Billy could hear the words clearly. “YOU CAN’T LET PEOPLE TREAT YOU THIS WAY! IT’S TIME TO TAKE A STAND FOR YOUR RIGHTS! SO BITE ’EM IF YOU GOT ’EM!!!”

Billy turned to see Teddy onstage, stuffing a giant sausage in his mouth. Grease dribbled down his beard.

The audience went wild.

A full squad of officers suited in riot gear marched toward the stage.

Billy heard a voice behind him scream, “WE’RE NOT GONNA LET THEM SHUT US DOWN YET!” He turned to see the Rain-Blow mime lurching toward the wooden gingerbread man with a torch in his hand, while his tribesmen squirted gasoline on the huge slab of wood. “WE’VE GOT GINGERBREAD TO BURN!”

Justin Bailey pulled up outside a small brick store crisscrossed all over with red and white candy-cane stripes of paint. He looked up at a sign above the shop, which read FEED YOUR HEAD.

He knew he was in the right place. The time had come for action.

Bailey tilted his head down, toward the tiny transmitter microphone duct-taped under his shirt. He spoke softly and slowly. "Okay. All clear. I'm going in. Copy?"

Sergeant Belcher's distorted electrified voice on the car radio replied, "Copy that, I'm two cars up. Got your back. Good luck in there. Over and out."

Bailey swept his fingers between his lips and gums to ensure the cotton inserts were still in place. During the past week he'd spent hours in front of his bathroom mirror, rehearsing. At first, it was difficult for him not to slur while using the inserts, but he discovered an easy trick. He simply soaked the cotton pads in water before stuffing them in, so they stayed moist, allowing him to speak normally, even with a bloated face. Nobody would suspect he ran the Cops Against Cookies triathlon last summer.

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A small child wearing a massive green gorilla costume ran smack into Bailey's phony gut as he stood by his unmarked car. The gorilla reeled backwards and almost toppled onto the concrete, but Bailey reached out to steady the fuzzy beast.

"Whoa! Careful! Where you goin' in such a hurry, monkey man?"

"Sorry, mister. I can't see nothing with this mask."

The kid ran off down the street, leaving Bailey to sigh, readjust his foam padding once more, and waddle up to the store, past a young, long-haired guy in a tie-dyed T-shirt, who sat cross-legged on the sidewalk, playing a fluttering tune on a flute made from a section of hollowed-out sugarcane.

Bailey glanced at the large handwritten sign taped on the glass front door of the shop, which stated: "Absolutely, positively nobody under 18 admitted (don't even think about asking)."

He surveyed the store as he shuffled through the door. An antique, carnival-style cotton candy-maker stood in the center of the floor, next to a rack of junk-oriented T-shirts. There was quite an assortment of clothes, some advertising Snickers, White Castle, and Frito-Lay products long ago outlawed, others adorned with protest slogans like STUFF YOUR FACE and FAT PEOPLE ARE BEAUTIFUL.

A lanky clerk wearing a Ronald McDonald costume stood behind a glass display counter. He adjusted the dial on a digital radio that blared Bow Wow Wow's bongo-fueled rendition of "I Want Candy." The clerk stared into a mirror behind the counter, popping a zit. Then he adjusted his wig and turned toward Bailey, his only customer.

"Welcome to Feed Your Head. Something in particular I can help you with this evening? We've got a discount on crouton cones."

"Crouton cones?"

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“Here. See?” The clerk pointed at what plainly appeared to Bailey to be a stack of wafer ice-cream cones, like you could find in grocery stores during pre-prohibition days.

“Yeah. So what’re they used for?”

The clerk clown chuckled. “Well, mainly people serve cabbage salad in them. They say it gives a salad that extra crunch and a touch of class, when they have company. If you’re in the market, I’ll sell you five cones for twenty dollars. Interested?”

“Uh, no. I’d like to check out one of those fondue forks, though.”

The clerk shook his head and stared at Bailey. His face became serious, and he spoke in a monotone voice. “I’m sorry. I really don’t know what you mean.”

“Umm, aren’t those fondue forks, hanging on the wall? Right back there.”

The clerk shifted his weight and tapped his fingers on the counter, as if he were hesitant. “Oh no. They’re elongated broccoli utensils.”

“Huh?”

“Elongated broccoli utensils. Fondue forks are for illegal substances, like chocolate and cheese. Therefore, it would be against the law for me to sell them in this store. Elongated broccoli utensils, on the other hand—”

“That’s ridiculous. A bunch of nonsense, you ask me!”

The clerk crossed his arms. “Maybe. But if you insist on breaking the law by soliciting contraband, I’ll be required by said law to ask you to leave the premises.” The clerk glared at Bailey, then grinned slyly.

Bailey knew this bust would require more than covert semantics. The clerk was too much on guard, too educated about the laws. “All right, I get it. So could I see one of those . . . elongated broccoli utensils?”

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“Sure, no problem.”

The clerk reached behind him and dismounted a beautifully polished wood-and-steel fondue fork from the wall, then cautiously handed it to his customer.

Bailey rotated the fork in his hand and scanned the glass display cabinet. He wasn't fooled by the legal-loophole lingo. He knew what these products were really used for.

“Okay, I think I'll go with the broccoli extender tonight.” Bailey handed the fondue fork to the clerk.

“The elongated broccoli utensil,” the clerk corrected. “Okay, that'll be \$35.72 with tax.”

He wrapped the fork in tissue paper and rang up the charge on the register while Bailey admired the cotton-candy machine. The red-and-yellow swirling clown design mesmerized him. He remembered the old portable machines they used to set up at the zoo. He pressed against the side of the glass and peered through at the steel well, where sugar fibers had once been spun into sweet, magical cotton balls.

And that's when Bailey noticed it. Tucked into the crease of the shiny well was a solitary, tiny wisp of pink cotton.

Bailey knew it wasn't much evidence, but it was enough. He had his man.

He turned, faced the clerk, and spoke the pre-determined code words: “You had a lot of trick-or-treaters tonight?”

The clerk frowned and scratched his red wig. “What are you talking about?”

Bailey took a long breath, trying to stall. “You know, kids and stuff.”

“Didn't you read the sign?” The clerk pointed toward the door. “There's no minors allowed in here.”

“Yeah . . . but adults can trick-or-treat, too,” Bailey stammered.

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“Then no, we haven’t had any trick-or-treaters this evening. That’s \$35.72.”

Bailey knew something was wrong.

Belcher should have been here by now.

He felt his heartbeat accelerate under the foam padding.

He couldn’t think of anything to say. The only phrase that came to his mind was the designated cue words, so he stepped forward and said, “Trick or treat.”

The clerk stared at Bailey like he was insane. “You trying to be funny or something?”

Bailey swallowed.

The clerk licked his makeup-smearred lips, and said, “All right, man. I don’t have anything for you. All I got’s this elongated broccoli utensil.” He pointed the fondue fork at Bailey and smiled. “And if you don’t want me to stick it up your ass, I suggest you either pay for it or get the fuck out of my store.”

A horrible thought came to Bailey. He remembered his collision with the gorilla and shuddered.

The transmitter microphone dropped from under his shirt and landed on the cement floor with a loud clink.

The clerk rose on his oversized clown boots, leaned over the counter, and spotted the transmitter. He tilted his head up and pointed his nose at Bailey, squinting deep into his eyes for a moment of discerning clarity. Then he turned and scrambled through a small doorway to the back store-room.

“Shit!” Bailey spun around and bolted through the front door of the store. He waddled to the backup car and repeatedly smacked the driver-side window with the palm of his hand. “TRICK OR TREAT, TRICK OR TREAT!”

This frightened Sergeant Belcher, who almost spilled a nutrition shake all over his immaculate uniform. Belcher set down the can, threw open

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the car door and dashed into the street, yanking his gun from its waist-holster.

The young man playing the flute spotted Belcher lumbering toward him with his gun drawn. He leapt up from the sidewalk and sprinted down the street, glancing over his shoulder with frightened eyes, yelling, "Man, y'all are tripping!"

Bailey squatted down in the street and removed a pistol from his ankle strap. Then he waddled, trying to hold the stuffing under his shirt, until he reached Belcher, who crouched at the front door of Feed Your Head, clasping his gun with both hands.

Belcher looked at Bailey and whispered, "What you got, something good? A sugarcane grow-op?"

Bailey shook his head. "It's cotton candy. We're looking for Ronald McDonald. He's got an elongated— goddamn it, a fondue fork. And he's on to us."

