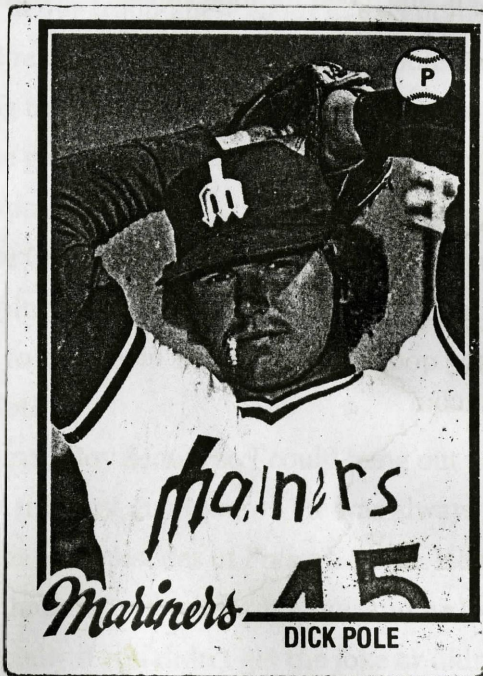


"The Revenge of Crothamel's Mules"

b/w

"Mrs. Scott's Hot Box"



Two stories by Mike Faloon

Last year I put out a zine called *The U-Haul Adventures*, which collected about two dozen stories and columns. Putting it together was like working on a double album: a lot of fun, but also a lot of work. I imagine the experience was pretty much like what Fleetwood Mac went through when putting out their double album *Tusk*. (Listen carefully and you will hear the faint yet resilient echoes of the USC marching band throughout these stories.) This summer, preparing to tour on the Perpetual Roadshow, I decided to put out a single, so to speak, following up the cumbersome with the concise. The a-side, "The Revenge of Crothamel's Mules," is from a forthcoming book on Gorsky Press, while the b-side, "Mrs. Scott's Hot Box," is from a novel in progress.

Thanks to Allie, Sean, and Todd for their input.

Enjoy,
Mike

I'd love to hear what you think of these stories:
801 Eagles Ridge Rd.
Brewster, NY 10509
gogometric@yahoo.com

©2005

The Revenge of Crothamel's Mules

Tom Crothamel brought a gun on our Boy Scout trip to Highland Forest. It was his grandfather's army pistol, and almost everybody in our troop knew about it, except me and Pete "Cyclo" Willis, and maybe our scout master, Mr. Sullivan. Crothamel didn't bring the gun for target practice or to earn a merit badge, he brought the gun because he was unstable and my suburban scout troop, chomping at the bit to see a real gun, a hint of danger, was dying to see Crothamel top himself. Most people think of Boy Scouts helping old ladies across the street or eating sprigs of chickweed to survive in the woods, but troop 320 was cut from a different cloth.

I joined Boy Scouts so I could hang out with my friend Josh Ratner, the funniest guy I knew. He was always quoting Woody Allen movies and episodes of *Police Squad*. He was in 8th grade, a year older than me and tall for his age, and he loved telling bad jokes, especially if you didn't get the joke or didn't want to hear it. Josh was a good guy who always seemed to know what to do. He was always grinning, too, so a lot of people thought he was a wise ass. That's definitely the first impression he made on Crothamel. They were playing three-on-three basketball behind the church,

just before a scout meeting, when Crothamel drove to the hoop and missed a layup.

“Foul! Give me the ball,” he said to Josh, holding up his hands anticipating a pass.

“C’mon, no blood, no foul. Let’s just keep playing,” Josh responded, smiling and dribbling to the top of the key. “Besides you didn’t need my help, you dropped that brick all by yourself.”

Josh’s joke didn’t go over well. The other guys got quiet and backed away, they hadn’t seen Crothamel challenged in a long time. Crothamel stormed toward Josh.

“You didn’t have position. I’ve got two shots coming. Give me the damn ball!”

Josh tried to contain his laughter. “Relax, Kareem, the NBA scouts are running late. Besides, it’s just...” He was cut off when Crothamel shoved him. He didn’t realize how serious Crothamel was until the guy was standing nose-to-nose and yelling for the ball.

“Easy, Dr. J., here you go,” Josh said, taking a step back, flipping the ball to Crothamel.

But Crothamel didn’t let it go, pushing Josh, making him stumble backwards underneath the basket. The other guys looked around, making sure the scout master was out of sight, and Crothamel kept coming.

“All right, all right, back off,” Josh said. Crothamel ignored him, backing Josh against the fence, the ball still between Crothamel’s forearm and hip. Josh could have counted each bead of sweat on the guy’s face. Instinctively, he slipped his leg behind

Crothamel's and pushed. Crothamel went sprawling to the ground. No one touched the ball as it popped loose and bounced to midcourt. Josh let out a laugh because he was surprised to see the old playground trick actually work. He offered to help Crothamel get up.

But Crothamel exploded. He slapped away Josh's hand, sprang to his feet and punched him in the stomach. Josh doubled over but not before Crothamel sent him to the pavement with a second punch. Then he stood over Josh, who was curled up on the ground, fighting back tears, and kicked him. "No one fucks with me!"

Quickly and painfully Josh learned that not everyone in troop 320 shared his sense of humor. So even before I joined, I knew that 320 had a relaxed regard for most of the Scout law—at least the helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, and cheerful parts, anyway—and I knew to stay away from Crothamel. But I signed up nevertheless because Josh and I had had so much fun in Cub Scouts, and our friend Cyclo Willis was joining, too. The trip to Highland Forest was one of the few times all three of us went on an overnight trip with the troop.

"Wanna hear a joke?" Josh asked.

No one in the van responded.

Josh continued, unfazed, "What do you call a guy, with no arms and no legs, in a pile of leaves?"

Cyclo looked at me, and I returned the favor.

"Russell," Josh said, giving us the punchline, "get it?"

As Cyclo and I thought about the joke, a hand reached from the far back seat and slapped Josh upside the head.

“That’s stupid, Ratner. You’re such a fucking retard.” The hand, like the comments, belonged to Tom Crothamel, resident thug-in-training. Despite the fight over a year ago, Josh couldn’t resist provoking Crothamel. Cyclo and I used to argue whether this made Josh foolish or fearless. I thought Josh had a lot of guts because he’d figured out how far he could go without getting beat up again. Cyclo said Josh got beat up once and that proved his point.

“Now move so I can get out or I’m going to kick your ass again, I gotta use the bathroom.” In Crothamel’s world, anything—an insult, a slap—could equal an ass kicking.

Crothamel and two of his cronies climbed out of the van behind us. Crothamel glimpsed through the gas station’s plate glass window and confirmed that Mr. Sullivan, our scout master, was occupied, talking to the attendant, before shoving Cyclo.

“Give me your bag, *Psycho*,” Crothamel demanded. “How many times do I have to kick your ass, you freckle-faced freak?”

Cyclo’s real name was Pete, and he was as anxious as he was brilliant. We used to call him Encyclo-Pete, like Encyclopedia Brown, because he remembered everything he ever read, comics, books, cereal boxes, but now it was just Cyclo, at least to his friends. I’d known him long before Cub Scouts. He was the first kid in our kindergarten class to read, not just identify letters, but really read. My dad always said that Cyclo’s parents pushed him too hard, which is why he did so well in school and also probably

why he was so scared of everything in life. Sometimes he'd have verbal panic attacks, talking out loud and worrying himself into a frenzy, running his hands through his feathered, bright red hair as he imagined one worst case scenario after another. That's why Cyclo's parents wanted him in Boy Scouts, to overcome his fears.

"Hurry up, *Psycho*, or I'll pull those Spiderman Under-roos over your head!"

"I don't wear Under-roos anymore," Cyclo said before handing over his navy blue backpack. Crothamel reached in and took out a pack of Marlboros. Then he and his buddies walked around the back of the gas station.

"So you got cigarette duty, not bad," I said, "Maybe Crothamel likes you. I got the fireworks. Least it's better than last time. Man, I thought that bottle of whiskey was going to break in my bag. My dad would have been so pissed off. I don't even know why Crothamel brings fireworks, though. All he ever does is show them to other kids, he never uses them."

When it came to packing for a camping trip, Tom Crothamel didn't restrict himself to standard issue scout equipment like flashlights, canteens, and mess kits. And until last fall he'd had no problem smuggling an array of cigarettes, booze, pot, and fireworks on our overnight trips. Then, at a Regional Scout Jamboree, Crothamel got busted getting high with a bunch of scouts from Binghamton. Mr. Sullivan generally looked the other way when it came to vices that he enjoyed—like smoking and drinking—but drugs pissed him off, and Crothamel's dad, who was a cop, agreed with Mr. Sullivan. Mr. Crothamel gave his son a

genuine ass kicking, and let him stay in the troop but only if Mr. Sullivan checked Crothamel's bags before every trip. Crothamel's solution was to recruit other kids to transport his contrabands.

That's where Josh, Cyclo, and I came in, and though we weren't comfortable playing the part of Crothamel's couriers, especially since we caught part of *Midnight Express* one night on HBO, we were growing accustomed to our roles; we knew our place in the 320 tribe, which broke down into three types of kids: the fascists, the burnouts, and the losers. The fascists kept their hair cropped short and snapped to attention at the start of the weekly meetings, passionately rendering the oath each time. They knew the Scout handbook inside and out and viewed Boy Scouts as a calling, the beginning of a life serving their country, which carried the privilege of subjugating people they disliked. The fascists sought conflict. They loved reminding each other that if the U.S. military fell in the face of foreign invasion, the Boy Scouts were the next line of national defense. They found it easy to look past their goofy neckerchiefs and see themselves as the Green Berets of tomorrow. And for reasons they never made clear, they also hated Irish Catholics.

I remember when Crothamel approached me at my first troop meeting, in the basement of St. Charles church. I was one of the new kids and Mr. Sullivan had just introduced me before going into the back room to get some paper work.

"Faloon, huh? Sounds okay. Are you R.C. or I.C.?", Crothamel asked, neglecting to introduce himself. He was flanked by his two favorite lackeys, Keith Gorman and Bobby Cebeanic.

Crothamel, ever the astute social scientist, could tell that an answer to his question was not forthcoming. He took a step closer and kindly repeated himself, careful, in the tradition of all great shitheads, to phrase the question in the exact same way, only louder and slower, before tagging on an insult.

“Are you R.C. or I.C.?” he said again, “answer me!” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before adding, “what’re you, gay?”

I was transfixed by his enormous glasses, the lenses like a pair of transparent moons and clearly meant for a much larger face. “What do you mean, R.C.?”, I asked, “like the soda?”

“*Roman Catholic or Irish Catholic!*? What’re you stupid, too?” Crothamel’s retainer caused him to spray just a bit.

Gorman and Cebeaniac further illuminated their leader’s line of inquiry.

Gorman: “What’re you, stupid?”

Cebeaniac: “Yeah, fag.”

“Well, we used to go to St. Ann’s, so I guess we’re Catholic.” I’d forgotten about Josh’s fight with Crothamel, but I was still a little nervous, filling the air with words. “I was an altar boy. It was all right when Father Pedzick did the masses—he had a good sense of humor—but I never did like Father Richards, he was always so serious, mean, almost.”

Crothamel glared at me, awaiting confirmation that I stood with him or against him in the non-existent battle between Roman Catholics and Irish Catholics, which was kind of like asking

someone if they were British or English. I continued before he could say anything.

“I remember this one time, I’d been kneeling—you know the part just before communion—and when I stood up my robe got caught on the backs of my shoes and I almost fell backward. Father Richards got mad at me after mass, really mad. Said I should be more careful.”

I was staring at the Life Scout patch on stitched on Crothamel’s uniform pocket, an inviting sunset orange heart in a sea of stop sign red. I hadn’t thought about Father Richards for a long time and I could have gone on all day about him and how my family didn’t go to church anymore and that when we used to go my brothers and I would fight most of the time, which was really embarrassing, but that wasn’t what Crothamel was looking for.

“Shut up, Jesus, shut up,” Crothamel said, jabbing his finger into my chest, “We’re all Roman Catholic; 320’s an R.C. troop, so just be careful, pagan!”

Adhering to cliché, Gorman and Cebeaniak echoed their master’s words.

Gorman: “Yeah, we’re R.C.”

Cebeaniak: “So be careful.”

Pagan? What did that mean, I wondered? Somewhere along the line a little bit of knowledge had done a lot of damage to this kid.

The burnouts, on the other hand, grew their hair as long as their parents would let them and mumbled their way through the oath. They sought escape and viewed Boy Scouts as a chance to

get away from home. They were older and they smoked and got drunk and got high, and they listened to rock music. 94-Rock, to be exact, Syracuse's home for classic rock. I wasn't even into Top 40 yet. The two albums I owned were *The Electric Company* version of Spiderman and K-Tel's *Dumb Ditties*. Rock music scared me. Everything I knew about it came from rumors and t-shirts. Like the rumor about Ozzy biting the head off a bat. Or the t-shirts the burnouts wore, especially the highly coveted *Blizzard of Oz* that showed Ozzy clutching a cross, crawling past skulls with blood dripping from his mouth. I'd never heard Ozzy or read about him, but I thought he was a lunatic, and maybe a vampire, so in my mind all rock stars were lunatics. Concert t-shirts were a key part of the burnout uniform, they kind of helped the burnouts put up a tough façade, so people would leave them alone in school or at the mall. It worked on me, but they must have looked ridiculous to anyone who knew anything about music. For every Ozzy or cocaine t-shirt they won at the state fair—you know the one where cocaine is spelled out in the Coca Cola cursive—there were three or four Journey or Foreigner t-shirts. Or Styx, another 320 favorite. I didn't know anything about the band Styx, but I knew where the river Styx flowed.

The burnouts didn't care whether or not I was in troop 320. They intimidated me because they didn't care about anything and there was always the chance that they would drag me into their debauchery. One day, while I kneeling beside a quiet brook, filling my canteen, happily humming "The Monster Mash," they'd haul me off into the woods and turn me into a drugged-out

zombie, forcing me to drink PCP—or smoke PCP or inject PCP, or do whatever you it was you were supposed to do with PCP, that part of the nightmare was always vague—and then they'd make me drink cat's blood or decapitate a canary and I'd wake up the next day with a tattoo of a thorny red rose on my bicep.

Crothamel was the link between the two factions. The fascists didn't smoke or drink with Crothamel, but they liked his willingness to kick ass and that he waved the R.C. flag. The burnouts didn't understand why Crothamel bothered with oaths and badges, but they shared recreational interests and that was enough.

The third group—Josh, Cyclo, and me—was known as the losers. We were younger than the rest of the troop, and anxious to finish out the year so we could quit. We'd come to hate every second of Boys Scouts and knew that if we stayed in troop 320 we were destined to become fascists or fuck ups. Or, like Tom Crothamel, both.

"Why do you have to tell such lame jokes?", Cyclo asked, poking through his back pack, "especially in front of Crothamel and them. You know they're going to give us shit."

"Look, they're going to pick on us anyway, we might as well have some fun," Josh responded, his familiar smile returning.

"Crap, he did it again." Exasperated, Cyclo pulled a crumpled comic book from his bag, "Look, Crothamel ruined the new Fantastic Four."

As Cyclo surveyed the damage, Mr. Sullivan walked up to the van and clapped his hands once, before unleashing his

megaphone voice. "Okay, guys, everybody in. I hope you all went to the bathroom. Just a half hour till we get to Highland Forest."

No one spoke the rest of the trip, one of our annual winter outings. Mr. Sullivan tuned into the second half of a Syracuse/Boston College basketball game on the radio. Cyclo fumed and read comics. I stared out the window and kept wiggling my toes so they wouldn't go numb.

Before long we drove past the entrance to Highland Forest. About a half mile into the camp grounds we came to our lodge. It was long and narrow and surrounded on three sides by pine trees. Crunching through the snow, we carried our gear inside.

"It's pretty late, boys, and we've got a big day tomorrow," Mr. Sullivan's voice boomed through the lodge as he began setting down an armload of firewood, "so choose a bunk and unpack. Lights out in a half hour."

The fireplace was at one end of the lodge with a kitchen off to one side and a bathroom on the other. Mr. Sullivan took the bunk closest to the kitchen. Most of the fascists settled near Mr. Sullivan while the burnouts went to the far end. Josh, Cyclo, and I were stuck in the middle bunks.

Crothamel and company paid us a courtesy call, scout toothbrushes and collapsable drinking cups in hand, as they walked from the bathroom to their bunks next to the back door.

"Hey, gaywads, just came by to tuck you in," Crothamel said, "and see where your bags are. We might need to borrow something tonight."

Gorman watched for Mr. Sullivan. Cebeaniak looked the other way.

Already in bed, and unable to take advantage of Crothamel's tuck in offer, I rolled over and pointed under my bunk. "My bag's right here."

Cyclo, in the bunk across from mine, pointed to his bag. "Here's mine."

Then Josh, on the bunk above Cyclo, chimed in.

"Oh crap, I'm so sorry. I forgot both of my dildos, so I don't have anything you'd want. But just in case, my bag's next to Cyclo's."

Josh quickly pulled up his blanket as Crothamel smacked at his head, delivering the requisite good-night ass kicking.

Before long the only light came from the fading fire and the only sounds came from Mr. Sullivan's footsteps as he walked the length of the lodge, pausing periodically to make sure everyone was accounted for. I was asleep shortly after Mr. Sullivan began snoring, but I stirred several times during the night as I heard Crothamel rummaging through our bags.

There was a square of sunlight on my blanket when I woke up. I could hear a bunch of guys eating breakfast and planning their activities for the day. I put on my glasses and saw Mr. Sullivan check his watch, a sign that he would soon rouse the rest of us. Reaching beneath my bunk, I checked the contents of my bag.

"Morning, Mike," Cyclo groaned. His arm was elbow-deep

in his bag. "They still have about half a pack for tonight," he said, referring to Crothamel's supply of cigarettes.

"Morning, Cyclo," I replied. "Yeah, I heard Crothamel and them a lot last night. Didn't he say he was going to bring his grandfather's gun this time? He must have chickened out."

"He's so full of crap," said Cyclo, sitting up as he finished the latest issue of *The Flash*.

We got dressed and joined Josh for breakfast.

"Morning, boys," Mr. Sullivan said between sips of coffee, his voice too loud for the early hour. "The bacon's gone, but there's still plenty of scrambled eggs. You should try to wake up earlier. You don't want to end up like those gentlemen." He pointed to the burn outs, just coming to life at the far end of the lodge.

Mr. Sullivan scraped a pile of eggs onto each of our plates and continued talking. "You boys going to camp this summer?"

Hell no, I thought to myself, I'm quitting at the end of the year. I'd quit now if I could. I went to camp last summer. I'd had a terrible time my first year in Boy Scouts—it never got any better after the Roman Catholic/Irish Catholic interrogation—and I tried psyching myself up that camp could turn things around. I figured if I got into it, Boy Scouts could be as much fun as Cub Scouts or Webelos, where we used to do make goofy crafts out of popsicle sticks and egg cartons, while eating pretzels and Fritos. So I poured over the pages of my handbook and circled a dozen or so merit badges that looked interesting. But even at the height of my Scouting ambitions, I clearly wasn't meant for Troop 320. The

merit badges that looked cool to me were things like bookbinding, dentistry, and dog care; gardening, plumbing, and reading; stamp collecting, and theater. While most of my troop was split between, on the one hand, preparing to engage the Russians in hand-to-hand combat, and, on the other hand, running a hotbed of adolescent hedonism, I was more likely to be drafting the requirements for the Broadway show tunes merit badge—perform before your troop two or more songs from *Singin' in the Rain*; compare and contrast the Broadway and Hollywood cast albums of *West Side Story*; etc., etc. In the end I earned two merit badges from camp, leatherwork and mammals. For the first, I cut two pieces of leather and stitched them together into the lamest of wallets and for the second, I sat around reading copies of *Ranger Rick* with Cyclo.

Camp was also the week that I first experienced Crothamel the bully. When I first joined the troop, he would ask strange questions and make fun of me, and I knew about his fight with Josh, but that summer he was abusive to me and Cyclo. We arrived on a Sunday. With Josh at baseball camp, Cyclo and I had a tent to ourselves, one of those canvas tents that was set up on a wood platform. The first day we overslept and missed our merit badge classes. Mr. Sullivan lectured us, Crothamel standing by his side, nodding in agreement. The next morning, Crothamel took matters into his own hands. Sunlight streamed into the tent and I noticed someone pulling back the front flap. I was aware but not awake. That changed when Crothamel kicked me, putting the heel of his hiking boot in my groin and yelling at me to get up. The

pain was instant and blinding. I tried not to cry. Cyclo opened his eyes a split second before getting the same treatment. I remember Crothamel saying we were wimps and somebody needed to toughen us up. We had trouble sleeping the rest of the week, always waking up before dawn and before Crothamel had a chance to dish out more punishment. Cyclo and I never talked about it. We never told on him either because we feared things would only get worse.

“Just wash your dishes there in the sink when you’re done, boys. The skis, boots, and poles are right out back,” Mr. Sullivan said. “We’ll see you back here at noon.”

Mr. Sullivan was leading a group of guys into the woods to work on their wilderness survival merit badge. Mr. Cebeaniak had driven up for the day and he was taking another group ice fishing. Josh, Cyclo, and I were going cross country skiing.

We stuck together for the first two hours, skiing a little bit and throwing a lot of snowballs. Cyclo went ahead after awhile and he was sitting on a tree stump a stone’s throw from the edge of the lake when we caught up.

Josh greeted him. “The world’s greatest comic magazine, huh?”

Cyclo exhaled. “Sometimes a man just needs to get away for a smoke and some quality literature,” alluding to the smoldering Camel he held in his left hand and the copy of Avengers #206 in his right. “Except, this is the Avengers, Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. The Fantastic Four is the world’s greatest comic magazine.”

"I know," Josh replied, "I just like to give you the chance to be right every once in awhile." He brushed off a snow-covered log adjacent to Cyclo.

We'd settled in so that all three of us had a view. It was a beautiful scene. The sun broke through and reflected off the frozen lake, our voices muffled by the surrounding snow.

I always thought it was weird that Cyclo, the ultimate worry wort, liked smoking, even it was only two or three cigarettes a week. "Keep smoking and you're going to be a burnout," I said.

"Thank you, Father Faloon. I'll be sure to burn in hell for my mistakes." Cyclo knelt down, put out his cigarette, and made the sign of the cross. "Now for my penance I'd like to see how the Avengers save New Jersey from the wrath of Pyron, the Thermal Man."

"Up yours," I laughed. It was good to hear Cyclo goof around, he never really loosened up when Crothamel or any of those guys were around.

Half way across the lake I could see Mr. Cebeaniak and six or seven guys from our troop. They'd drilled four holes in the ice and had their fishing lines in the water.

"It's going to suck without you," I said to Josh. His family was moving across town in a couple weeks and this was his last trip with 320. "Who's going to mouth off to Crothamel now?"

"You guys will be fine," Josh said.

"I'm jealous, though. My mom won't let me quit until the end of school. I'm sick of dealing with those guys, they ruin everything," I said.

“I’m quitting at the end of the year too,” said Cyclo, “but this is my last camping trip. Ever. I’m never going to carry any of Crothamel’s crap again.”

Cyclo exhaled and went back to the Avengers. Josh took out a candy bar. Watching the lake, I saw Mr. Cebeaniak stand up as he reeled in a fish through a hole in the ice.

Me: “I wish my Uncle Carlton was our Scout Master, that’d be so cool. He’s into ice fishing and hunting and snowmobiling, but he’s funny, you know? He doesn’t take things so seriously, but he still does things.”

Cyclo: “I have a plan to quit smoking, you know. I’m going to quit the day I graduate from high school. That way I’ll be done before I get cancer.”

Me: “My uncle actually lost his two front teeth in a bar fight. It happened up in Maine. He was out with some friends and got into an argument with this guy about the Red Sox or JFK or something. The guy punched my uncle in the mouth, and knocked out a couple of teeth, but my uncle ended it with like two punches. Mr. Sullivan would be so much better off if he got into a bar fight.”

Josh: “Yeah, all those guys need to lighten up.”

Cyclo: “It only gets better you know. High school, then college. I can’t wait. I’m going to college near New York City. It’s too dangerous to live in the city, but so much happens there. My cousin goes to college in New York. She loves it. They get all the best movies two weeks before we do. I’m not sure what I’m going to major in yet, but you guys can come visit me.”

Out on the lake I saw a fish flopping on the ice and Mr.

Cebeaniak slapping the back of his son's head.

Cyclo: "How can they spend so much time sitting on ice? How do they know there aren't huge cracks under all that snow?"

Me: "My Uncle Carlton says it only takes three inches of ice to hold a horse and a foot will hold a car. When he goes on ice fishing trips he parks his truck on the ice and sleeps there overnight. My Aunt Donna goes with him."

Josh: "Dang, that's like those mountain climbers who can sleep on the side of a mountain. They hammer a few spikes into the rock and then just hang there all night, nothing below them."

Cyclo: "It's still crazy, if you ask me."

After Cyclo finished reading the Avengers—the Wasp saved the day by extinguishing Pyron with a "chemical foam capsule"—we skied back to the lodge for lunch. We spent the afternoon hiking with Mr. Sullivan and most of the burnouts. Then everyone gathered back at the lodge for dinner. It was dark by the time the three of us were doing the dishes.

"I heard Mr. Sullivan talking to Crothamel today, saying what a good job he was doing, you know, staying out of trouble. Pisses me off," Cyclo said. "I also heard the rumor again, about Crothamel bringing his grandfather's gun. Man, kids will believe anything he tells them."

"He wimped out," I said dismissively, rinsing a skillet and handing it to Josh to dry.

Wiping the back of the skillet, Josh spoke quietly, "he didn't wimp out."

“What do you mean, he didn’t wimp out?”, Cyclo asked, opening the silverware drawer.

“What I mean is that last night, before we left St. Charles, Crothamel put a gun in my bag. A real gun. He said they’d all kick the shit out of me if I didn’t take it. It’s his grandfather’s pistol from when he was in the Army. I don’t think it’s loaded, but it’s real.”

Cyclo and I believed him for a second before we started laughing.

I move on to the next splotch of baked-on grease. “Good one, Josh.”

But then Josh’s face tensed up. The rest of his smile went away and his tone of voice became much more serious, adult-like.

“I mean it. It’s wrapped up in a flannel shirt in the bottom of my bag. Didn’t you notice how times he came by last night? It was like six times. He wasn’t just getting cigarettes or cherry bombs, he was checking on the gun.”

Cyclo and I froze. Josh kept drying. The lodge seemed to expand as the reality of what Josh was saying sank in. Even last summer at camp, as awful as that was, Crothamel never tried anything like this, but I could tell Josh was telling the truth. I knew we were too old for the days of making Pinewood Derby cars, but this was messed up. My vision blurred a bit and a gentle weight descended over my whole body, like when the dentist drapes that blanket over you before taking x-rays.

“Holy shit, we’ve got to tell Mr. Sullivan,” Cyclo said, turning to see if anyone could hear us.

I picked up a dirty coffee mug, trying to act casual. "Why didn't you tell us before?"

Cyclo continued. "I know Mr. Sullivan is a dick, but he'll take care of this." He stared at Josh, like he was asking for permission to tell our scout master.

"I didn't know what to say," Josh explained.

"I can't believe I slept above a gun all night! What if it went off accidentally?" Panic seeped into Cyclo's voice. "There could be a bullet stuck in me right now and the lead is getting into my bloodstream. That happens, you know. Sometimes people get shot but don't realize it for days. Now I know why I've been aching all over today."

"Cyclo—Pete—calm down." Josh tried to interrupt, but Cyclo had too much momentum.

"I bet there's lead in those bullets. That's what brought down the Roman Empire, you know. Lead poisoning. Those big goblets they used to drink wine out of? They were made out of lead, but the Romans didn't know that lead was poisonous. So they just kept on using the lead cups, killing themselves by accident. Alexander the Great died of lead poisoning. And it's the worst kind of death. I saw something on the news about one woman—she got lead poisoning from a cereal bowl—she was so weak that she couldn't even have a bed sheet on her at night because it was so painful."

"Look, I think Cyclo is right, I think we should tell Mr. Sullivan," I said, trying to stay calm but hearing my voice quiver.

"Cyclo, relax, all right? First of all, Alexander the Great

was Greek, not Roman and second, this is the twentieth century, not the Battle of Lexington, okay? There's no lead musket ball in your ass. Trust me, you'd know if you got shot. And we aren't going to say a thing to Mr. Sullivan. Just one more day," Josh said. "Don't worry, guys. He's not going to use it, he just wants to show it off. You know Crothamel. It's not loaded."

As we finished the dishes, Josh tried to make jokes, but Cyclo and I were speechless. I jumped out of my skin when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Whoa, easy, Mike, just wanted you to pass me a couple of plates for S'mores." It was Craig Baker. He usually hung out with the fascists, but he wasn't a bad guy. "Hurry up and finish, Mr. Sullivan just got started."

At another Boy Scout troop in some other world, a Scout master might want to end a camping trip by bringing his scouts together, sharing stories and telling jokes to remind you that you'd made the right choice by joining the Boy Scouts. Kind of like a football coach congratulating his team after a big win, the activity's over and it's time to build morale. Mr. Sullivan had a different approach—he wanted to scare the shit of us. He didn't tell ghost stories, he told horror stories. Everyone would be in a circle and Mr. Sullivan's pinched, sunken eyes would scan for the most frightened face, the face he'd focus on the most. He'd suck the cigarette smoke into the deepest recesses of his lungs and lower his voice, the only time he ever got quiet. His tales always seemed to involve someone being buried alive, a person coming to full consciousness a day after being buried and frantically scratching

the coffin lid until they'd used up their oxygen and suffocated, their fingers reduced to bloody stubs. Someone would ask how we'd even know that a person had been buried alive and Mr. Sullivan would go into a detailed account of a local cemetery being relocated, a coffin being dropped and popping open, revealing a scratched up coffin lid and a person's face frozen from their final scream. Then he'd talk about how in the old days so many people were accidentally buried alive that some people used to pay extra to have bells put next to their graves, with a string running inside the coffin so that if they were buried alive they could ring the bell and be dug up before it was too late. Then, as if I wasn't freaked out enough, Mr. Sullivan would keep going, trying to make us feel better by telling us about modern burial techniques. We were lucky, we didn't have to worry about being buried alive any more because now days they used embalming fluid before burying people, and to use embalming fluid they cut underneath your arm pits and drain your blood before pumping you full of the fluid and there's no way you could go through that and not wake up.

I was too busy thinking about Crothamel and the gun to pay attention to that night's story, but the effect was still the same: I wanted morning to come in a hurry. I ate a couple of s'mores but didn't taste anything.

Crothamel took out his boombox as everyone was getting ready for bed. I heard someone singing off key. It was Gorman: "I meet those bad girls hanging around."

Cebeaniac, pointing to the Foreigner 4 t-shirt he was wearing under his scout uniform, took the next line: "Never doing what they oughta."

The tape had moved onto "Jukebox Hero" by the time Crothamel walked past us on his way to the bathroom. He got right up in Josh's face, using his finger to punctuate each word that he sang—"Stars! In! His! Eyes! He'll come alive tonight!" The manical look on his face made it clear that he knew that we'd heard about his plans.

"Look, dickwads, I've got a special offer tonight," he said, "make sure no one touches my stuff and I won't kick your ass or your ass." He pointed to Cyclo, then me before saying to Josh, "might still have to kick your ass, though."

At the end of the cabin, I could hear Gorman and Cebeaniac dueting on "Waiting For a Girl Like You." The homoerotic irony lost on everyone.

"Just keep your eyes open and your mouths shut. Got it?"

"Ya volt, Benito," Josh mumbled.

Crothamel faked that he was going to slap Josh, then casually smoothed back his own hair, smirked, and walked away. That was the last time Crothamel spoke to any of us.

"I fucking hate that guy!"

"Shh, quiet, Cyclo," Josh said.

"Keep it down back there," Mr. Sullivan yelled. "Lights out in five minutes. And turn off the music."

Crothamel and company finished singing to side one of the Foreigner cassette and a few seconds later the tape clicked off.

I never saw the gun. Only Crothamel's allies were invited. A few minutes after Mr. Sullivan was snoring, Crothamel walked toward our bunks. I could see Cyclo turn over and face the wall, and I did the same. I couldn't tell who was first to follow Crothamel out the back door, but after a few minutes two shadowy figures crept back to their bunks and the next pair of scouts, anxious to see the spectacle, pulled the door open in slow motion. I tossed and turned all night but lost track of how many kids snuck out back. I stared at the half moon outside the window and waited for it to end.

Somehow the trip back was even quieter than the trip up, though Crothamel's smirk seemed bigger than ever. He had ruled the roost before this camping trip, but now he'd proven once and for all that he was willing to do anything. He wasn't even a jerk to us that morning, politely asking us to step aside so that he might use the "lavatory" when we stopped for gas. He was really pouring it on.

Most of the parents were waiting for us when we got back to St. Charles, including Cyclo's dad.

"Josh, I guess you were right," Cyclo chuckled, "I survived without getting shot. Thanks for calming me down. Stay in touch, okay? Mike, give me a call this week. Maybe we can go see the new *Superman* movie Saturday, all right?"

Cyclo's dad beeped and waved as they drove off. Mr. Sullivan asked if anyone needed to use the bathroom. Josh pulled

a paper bag out of his backpack and followed Mr. Sullivan into the basement of St. Charles.

I knew my mom would be late so I sat down on the lawn that ran between the entrance to the church and Taunton Road. When I saw Crothamel walking toward me, his sidekicks nowhere to be seen, I unzipped my bookbag and waited for him to pick up his fireworks.

Before he said anything to me, Crothamel opened Josh's bag and pulled out the folded flannel shirt. His face crumpled up as he peeled back the shirt. That's when Josh walked up.

"Pretty cool BB gun, right?", Josh said, "feels like a real gun."

Josh's mom drove past us and made a u-turn. She waved to Mr. Sullivan and Crothamel's dad who were talking at the far end of the parking lot.

"Be right there, mom," Josh yelled. Then he turned back to Crothamel. "The BB gun was part of my back up plan. I thought about switching them last night after you went to sleep."

Josh took back the BB gun and put it back in his backpack.

I was as shocked as Crothamel was.

"Where's your gun? I mean, your grandfather's gun?" Josh asked, each word dripping with sarcasm; he was savoring every second of the exchange. "It's right over there, safe and sound, don't worry. I thought you'd left already, so I gave it to Mr. Sullivan."

Josh pointed to Mr. Sullivan, who was in the process of passing the real gun to Officer David Crothamel. In unison, the two men's heads turned in our direction.

Mr. Crothamel yelled across the parking lot, "Tom!"

Crothamel looked at me, then Josh.

"Thomas! Here! Now!" It was Mr. Crothamel again, only louder.

Josh's mom pulled up closer. "Josh, honey, I know you want to say good-bye to your friends, but we have to go now. We're late to your grandparents."

"Coming," Josh said.

Crothamel's dad yelled again and Josh's mom waited, but they just stared at each other, Josh and Crothamel. I felt like I was watching an old western movie. The look on Crothamel's face was straight out the showdown where the villain is clutching his wounded chest, taking his last breaths, stunned that the sheriff outdrew him, one realization after another racing through his mind, only Josh had won this duel without even throwing a punch.

Crothamel's eyes were wide and pleading. Josh replied with a smile that grew wider as Mr. Crothamel's voice got louder. Josh hoisted up his backpack and extended his hand to me. "See you soon, Mike." Then he looked Crothamel in the eyes, holding his stare for an uncomfortably long time. When Crothamel flinched, Josh gave a sarcastic salute, and said, "up yours, douche bag" before clicking his heels together and getting in the front seat of his mom's car.

Mrs. Scott's Hot Box

Wayne Burke wiped the sweat from his brow again. Getting in trouble wasn't so bad after all. Here it was the middle of the school day and he could flip through his baseball cards as slowly as he wanted to, examining each face. He didn't even have to sneak, leaving the stack of cards right on top of the desk. He had been listening to the guest speaker, but he'd also been looking at his cards, so Mrs. Scott sent him to the hot box.

Ever since he was in first grade Wayne had been hearing about the legendary hot box. Every teacher at Split Rock Elementary was known for something—Mr. Candini always let his class stay out for extra recess, Mrs. Kreevich always wanted to tie your shoes, Mrs. Ashburn threw out your homework if it was wrinkled or didn't have your name on it (even though she could tell whose work it was from the handwriting)—and Mrs. Scott was known for two things: collecting more Campbells soup labels than any other teacher in the district, to help the school earn new playground equipment, and sending kids to the hot box.

With her glasses hanging around her neck and her hands covered in chalk dust, Mrs. Scott didn't look mean, but she made Wayne nervous, nonetheless, or at least the stories about the hot

box did. The hot box was really just a big janitor's closet, complete with buckets and mops, a shelf of bottles and cleaning rags, and the brightest light bulb ever. The room got its nickname because of the heating ducts that ran overhead, criss-crossing right above the school desk that sat in the far corner. It was the hottest room in the building, probably on the planet. Kids came out of the hot box dripping wet, their shirts dark and matted with sweat, their eyelids drooping and their parched tongues hanging out of their mouths. Their first words were always, "Sorry, Mrs. Scott." And the hot box was quiet, too, the walls thick enough to block out any sound from Mrs. Scott's or any other classroom. When you were in the hot box, you were really alone, and really bored, kids went out of their minds with nothing to do. The hot box made kids wish Mrs. Scott would just take out a belt or a ruler and go through the old "this is going to hurt you more than it's going to hurt me" routine. The hot box didn't bother Mrs. Scott at all, she just kept on teaching. It was her solution for students she didn't want to deal with, kids who talked back or used the springs in their pens to launch an ink cartridge across the room or worse, didn't pay attention to a guest speaker. That drove her insane. Other teachers sent kids to the office, but Mrs. Scott always said the office had enough headaches to deal with. So Wayne sat there by himself, sweating, staring at the players' faces on the cards, wiping his forehead on his shirt sleeve, trying to hear what was happening next door.

His class was studying the American Revolution, reading about Paul Revere and Crispus Attucks, taxation and

representation. The guest speaker was Mrs. Shattraw, a woman from the Everson Museum of Art in downtown Syracuse. She was quiet and had short, black hair, and she wasn't much taller than the students. Mrs. Shattraw had come to show colonial portraits to the class. She was talking about how portrait artists tried to reveal what their subject was like through the person's facial expression and dress and hair, the way they posed and what was placed in the background of the painting. They used all of these things to show a person's personality and status, along with what they did for a living and what their family life was like. So a wealthy lawyer would wear a powdered wig and his finest suit, and pose in his study, desk and books on display, while the window over his shoulder would look out onto an enormous estate, children playing in the foreground, a horse stable off in the distance.

As Wayne was listening to the woman from the museum, the baseball cards in the front of his desk caught his eye. The card on top was a pitcher for the White Sox, Clay Carroll. He looked mean. Some pitchers wanted to scare hitters a bit, so it'd be easier to get them out. Apparently, Clay Carroll didn't just want to get you out, he wanted you—the kid holding the card—to tremble in fear. He wanted to hit you with a ball or a bat or a rake, anything he could get his hands on. Wayne realized that this picture didn't capture Clay in the middle of a game. Clay chose to pose this way for his baseball card. He didn't want to just intimidate major league hitters, Clay clearly wanted to frighten the kids who were collecting cards now, the major league hitters of tomorrow. This

was a guy investing in his future. Wayne was lost in thought, captivated by the cruelty in Clay Carrol's furrowed brow, trying to further decode the player's personality when Mrs. Scott looked his way.

"Wayne Burke what are you doing?" Mrs. Scott bellowed, slapping her hand on her desk, bringing Mrs. Shattraw's presentation to a halt.

"Uh, Mrs. Scott, I'm just..."

"Don't you talk back to me! Mrs. Shattraw, class, please pardon the interruption, but Wayne's behavior is inexcusable. Wayne, we have a guest in our room and you're staring at your desk? You're not just representing yourself and this class, young man, you're representing Split Rock Elementary School. And what kind of impression are you making on Mrs. Shattraw and the Everson Museum of Art?"

Mrs. Shattraw gazed at Wayne. So did the rest of the class, all of them waiting for a good answer.

"But Mrs. Scott, I was just..."

"Enough back talk, Mr. Burke. Go to the hot box!"

"Okay, Mrs. Scott, but when can I..."

"You may rejoin the class when I know, not when I think, mind you, when I *know* you've learned your lesson!"

Wayne's cheeks were brighter than usual. He felt bad about being yelled at. He didn't like receiving attention at school, from the class, from Mrs. Scott, and he'd never been to the hot box before. Luckily he had another small stack of cards tucked in his shirt pocket.

Wayne took out the cards after closing the door behind him. The top card was Darrel Chaney and normally Wayne would have flipped to the back to study the stats, but today Wayne lingered on the picture, looking at it like it was a portrait, trying to figure out Darrel Chaney's personality. Darrel Chaney was easy to figure out; he was sad, on the verge of sobbing, like a kindergartener frozen in the moment just after his lunch has fallen into his lap and just before he realizes that crying very, very loudly will alert someone to his predicament. Darrel Chaney had the kind of face that invites pity, even from a third-grader like Wayne Burke who'd never had a hit in Little League. More than anything, the expression on Darryl Chaney's face looked just like Mrs. Schneider, Wayne's neighbor across the street. Wayne only saw her in the spring and summer, either kneeling in the flower beds in front of her ranch house, pruning rows of marigolds and sweating over bunches of petunias, or pushing a wheelbarrow full of weeds across the street to the fields where everyone in the neighborhood dumped their yard scraps. No one talked to Mrs. Schneider, but Wayne's dad did talk about her. He said that no matter how late he walked the dog at night, Mrs. Schneider would still be up, all the living room lamps turned off and the flashing light of the TV illuminating her curly-haired silhouette. Never Mr. Schneider, just Mrs. Schneider. And come to think of it, Wayne never saw her talking to either of her kids, which was weird because they were always outside when she was, Larry shooting hoops in the driveway and Sue roller skating around the block. Wayne started

feeling bad for Mrs. Schneider, then he started feeling a little sorry for himself, stuck in hot box, so he flipped to the next card.

He found himself looking at Steve Stone, another pitcher for the White Sox, but a guy who probably didn't hang out much with Clay Carroll. Wayne had looked at the card dozens of times but he never realized how much Steve Stone looked just like his dad's old friend, Mr. Zombrowski; the big, curly hair, the gold chain, the unbuttoned shirt and chest hair, the glassy eyed look. Wayne figured that Steve Stone was probably just like Mr. Zombrowski, a big talker who never let the facts get in the way of self promotion.

Mr. Zombrowski was the former town supervisor for nearby Camillus and he'd come to know Wayne's dad because their bands used to play together. Mr. Zombrowski had a southern accent, despite being born in Schenectady, and even though people took his stories and promises with a grain of salt, he was still a likeable guy; Wayne's dad called him a "character." Mr. Zombrowski was a regular at Burke backyard barbeques in the summer and he told the same stories every time, like how he helped produce the Monterey Pop Festival back in the 60s and nearly became the Mamas and Papas tour manager. But no one in Syracuse had famous connections—it was such an isolated city—so everyone wondered why a guy who said he'd hung out with the Who and Otis Redding and watched Jimi Hendrix light his guitar on fire from backstage was working as a small town supervisor and hanging out with teachers and salesmen who played music on the weekends. The summer before, the last time Mr. Zombrowski

came over, Wayne overheard his mom ask his dad how much of Mr. Zombrowski's stories were true.

"I think he helped stack chairs at Monterey, I guess they ran short on volunteers at the end of the festival," Mr. Burke said, "and maybe he brought a sandwich or two to Mama Cass. The rest is bullshit, though, just wishful thinking."

Mr. Zombrowski also liked to talk about his old band, the Kennesaw Mountain Boys, who nearly got their big break back in 1973, at least according to Mr. Zombrowski. The Kennesaw Mountain Boys, a five-piece country rock band who billed themselves as "the perfect middle of the road experience," were considered by a management company who later signed pop singer Leo Sayer. Mr. Zombrowski assumed Leo's success—the top 10 hits, the concerts, the *American Bandstand* appearances—were rightfully his, so every time "You Make Me Feel Like Dancing" or "When I Need You" came on the radio he'd say, "That should be us! That should be the Kennesaw Mountain Boys on the radio right now! They took food off my table when they signed that clown. And he's not going to last, everyone knows American bands always outlast English singers." Then Mr. Zombrowski would explain why it wasn't the Kennesaw Mountain Boys on the radio. "If we'd had our regular drummer the night that management company came to see us, I'd be on the radio now instead of flipping these burgers and dogs. That's money you can count on."

Mr. Zombrowski would go quiet for a few minutes but as soon as anyone spoke to him about anything—the band, the

burgers, town politics—he'd start talking about his unfulfilled dream, the project the Kennesaw Mountain Boys were never able to even begin: recording *A Candle Burning Bright*, a country rock opera about a day in the life of a Canadian mountie. Wayne realized that every adult had something they repeated at every cookout, a saying or a joke, but Mr. Zombrowski was the only grown up he knew who gave a sales pitch every time. Wayne's parents would roll their eyes and make a quick departure because they'd heard it so many times, but Mr. Zombrowski always gave the speech and always with the same fervor, whether he had an audience of one or a dozen.

"I've got something in the works now, though," he'd say, feigning reluctance and rotating a couple of hot dogs before continuing. "It's kind of like Charlie Daniels doing *Tommy*, with a little bit of the Marshall Tucker Band thrown in. This Canadian mountie, you see, he's kind of like the last of the sheriffs from the old west. He's gotta balance those long, lonesome rides in the wilderness with a home life, a wife and kids who miss him. It's all about duty, to your family, to yourself, to the law, and the Mountie never completely sorts it out, but he keeps going, he keeps burning, the whole time. He might flicker, but he won't go out. That's where I got the title, *A Candle Burning Bright*."

Mr. Zombrowski would pause again and tend to the grill. "It's going to be a double album, with a full-color gatefold cover. I can hear side four in my head already." Here he'd do this thing where he talked faster and quieter, his excitement coupled with his need to have someone else believe in his vision. "Side four, you

see, is a suite, one long song with four parts. The mountie, Jim—a common name, you know, something that’s easy for people to relate to—he’s down at his local watering hole, half way through a bottle of Jim Beam, and he’s thinking about not going home, about moving on to a new life. He’s having a crisis of faith, but he goes home and works it out with the Mrs. Then we’ve got the finale with Jim and his family and the bartender and the ice skater, everyone, and then the side ends with an alarm clock going off. It’s the next day and he’s back at it, back in the saddle. Of course, *A Candle Burning Bright* is all in the first person, not like *Tommy* which gets bogged down with so many third person songs. I’ve thought about this a lot. Might include a poster, too. I’ve got the artwork back at the house, but I’m going to wait until I have the money to do the whole thing right, really take my time writing and arranging, really take my time in the studio. This is something to craft and nurture, no rush job. And I’m going to get top sessions musicians, guys from Nashville or New York, no one local.”

A Candle Burning Bright is why Mr. Zombrowski got fired as town supervisor. He got caught embezzling about ten grand from the annual Kings Park Summer Cookout. His plan was to pay back the town, with interest, once the album went gold. He told Wayne’s dad that, really, when you thought about it, he was just investing the town’s money. People should have thanked him, it was money they could have counted on.

By now, Wayne was almost used to the temperature in the hot box and he started wondering if he knew anyone else that had gone to jail. He had just flipped to the next card, a player named

Dick Pole, one that always made his dad laugh, when Carol Micek knocked on the door.

“Mrs. Scott says you can come back now, Wayne. We’re lining up for lunch.” Carol left the door open and a cool breeze flowed in.

Wayne leaned forward, separating his sweaty shirt from the back of the chair, popped the cards back in his pocket, and started thinking about his apology to Mrs. Scott.

Here we find a thinly-veiled attempt to woo you, the page-flipping browser into reading more, maybe even purchasing (or, The 'About the author' page)

Mike Faloon has a number of credentials that cause his relatives to say things like, "That sounds fun, but do you know James Patterson? Now there's a writer. How about Catherine Coulter? I couldn't put down *Hemlock Bay!*" To which he replies something like, "The cranberry sauce is delicious! I don't know about the cake, though, my triglycerides are up." He'd like to list a few of those credentials in the hopes that one of them will prompt you to say something like, "Oh really, well that sufficiently legitimizes his experience, maybe this publication is worth my time." At which point you'll skim one of the stories, perhaps both. So let's have at it...He edits *Go Metric* and *Zisk* zines and contributes to such magazines as *Chin Music*, *Chunklet*, and *Roctober*, among others. He was included in *The Zine Yearbook: Volume 8* (Soft Skull Press, 2004) and has several reviews in the upcoming *Overrated Book* (due 2006). For the past three years he's served on the jury at the annual MicroCineFest film festival in Baltimore and last summer he made his NPR debut. Not wanting to rest on his laurels, however obscure they may be, he has recently co-written his first musical, which is based on the life and times of political crackpot and economic visionary Lyndon LaRouche. He and his wife live in Brewster, New York and his fastball has been clocked at 54 MPH, just a notch below the Hagar line.

And here we find a listing of other endeavors attributed to the author

***Go Metric*— a zine dedicated to music, movies, and humor**

“Most likely my favorite zine ever...Don't consider your bathroom complete without at least one issue bowlside. Your guests will thank you.”
– *Razorcake*

“Plays to the obscurity-fixated just as much as the everyday guy...this mag's great” – *Thrasher*

***The U-Haul Adventures*— a collection of stories and columns that my friend Mike calls “a punk rock version of *This American Life*”**

“A gifted eccentric if I ever saw one” – *Maximum RocknRoll*
“A zine mastermind” – *San Francisco Weekly*

***Zisk*— a baseball zine**

“For those who love baseball for its charm, history and eccentricities and not merely as something to play a fantasy league around”
– *Chicago Tribune*

“Waxes hilarious and poignant on America's national pastime” – *Clamor*

Check out the running commentary on the New York Mets 2005 season, written with co-editor Steve Reynolds, at ziskmagazine.blogspot.com

Available through Razorcake.com, AtomicBooks.com, ClamorMagazine.com, Quimbys.com, or StickfigureDistro.com

Treat yourself today!