

OLSEN'S NATION  
*(A Story of Hope for Change)*

A novel by  
Randy Quarles

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*This is a work of fiction. I made up the characters. The  
concerns are real.*

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*For Fran,  
and with thanks to my parents*

## NOTE TO THE READER

The following story was inspired by events that could happen in the very near future . . . .

# I

*“Healthcare is a big deal. It’s a good thing we have a big Government to run it.”*  
— *President Bodvar Olsen, at town hall meeting on the Cheap and Accessible Care Act*

THE PUG WHO occasionally responded to the name Lex waddled across the asphalt in a spread-legged squat like a miniature sumo wrestler. Marvin Edwards observed his dog’s constipation ritual while considering a request he had just received from the man who stood beside him. Changing his neighbor’s healthcare priority number under the federal Cheap and Accessible Care Act could get a bit sticky, even for Marvin. It would be different if his friend were someone important, or related to someone important. But altering a CACA number for an ordinary person was another matter—a bad precedent.

The favor seeker cleared his throat before speaking again:

“I’ve never seen a dog move like that.”

“Martha’s worried about him,” Marvin said, happy to address a different topic. “His constitution isn’t what it used to be.”

The other man grunted. “Whose is? Which brings me back to me. I really do need that colonoscopy, ASAP.”

Marvin shook his head.

“Sorry, Frank, but I can’t help you.”

“Sure you can,” Frank persisted. “You’re the chief numbers honcho of the Department of Universal Health and Life. With a couple of taps on your keyboard, I’ll have a camera lens up my butt in no time. Everyone knows that the Government fixes numbers for movie stars and political muckity-mucks. So just make a quick little change for me.”

With nothing to show for his effort, Lex finally rose from his squat and pulled at the leash. Marvin started walking, with Frank falling in step beside him.

“If my number’s not at least twenty-one-point-five,” Frank continued, “I won’t be able to get scoped for another year and a half, maybe two. My doctor says I need it now. And not just a measly little flexible sigmoidoscopy, either. We’re talking the whole nine yards.”

Lex halted and reassumed the position, his round, deep brown eyes bulging even more than usual with the strain. Still nothing to show for it, though. Frank clucked his tongue and remarked:

“There’s a lot of stopping and not much going with this little guy.”

“Look,” Marvin said, “it’s just not as simple as you might think. Sure, my office controls the healthcare of three hundred and sixty-five million American citizens and legal residents, plus twenty-five million undocumented guests of honor. And I know you think I can just wave a hand and make your problem go away, but it’s not that easy.”

“I’m not asking for the moon, Marvin. And I know you well enough to believe that, down deep,

you understand that the whole system is perverted.”

Marvin briefly considered expressing mild disagreement, which he definitely would have done had anyone else been present to hear Frank's blasphemy. But Frank went on without waiting for a response.

“Don't give me your final answer yet. Think about it for a little while. Sleep on it. But you're my last hope, short of a run south of the border.”

“What's south of the border?”

“Mexico.”

“Ah, yes. Mexico.” Marvin tapped his forehead. “How silly of me. But, pray tell, why Mexico?”

Lex halted to sniff a clump of clover blooms. Marvin watched and waited. His wife would require a poop report later, so it was important to see the dog's result, if any. Lex, however, merely sneezed twice before turning away from the clover. The trek resumed.

“My Plan B,” explained Frank, “is to skip over the border to the new Wizman Clinic in Palomas. It's for people who can't get the medical procedures they need in the good old U.S. of A. Wizman has all state-of-the-art stuff. Actually, it's *beyond* the state of the art in the States these days, thanks to the Government.”

“Why is your Plan A an attempt to corrupt me instead of going to Mexico?” Marvin asked.

“With gas at six bucks a gallon and going up by the day, I can corrupt you cheaper than I can get to Mexico.”

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t mean ‘corrupt’ in a *bad* way,” the older man assured Marvin. “There’s really nothing morally corrupt about what I’m asking you to do.”

“Just *legally* corrupt?”

Frank sighed. “It was legally corrupt for the *Government* to take over the whole damn healthcare system in this country, and for the *Government* to tell me I have to buy the insurance that the *Government* says I should buy, and even then, I can only get the treatment that the *Government* will approve.”

“You’re rehashing old arguments that the Supreme Court already has rejected, Frank.”

“The Supreme Court was wrong. I mean, come on, Marvin. Those fools quoted Ben Franklin’s *joke* in a letter—where he told someone that death and taxes are the only certainties in life—to rationalize saying that His Majesty Olsen and the Government can use a punitive tax to force us to buy insurance. They call that legal reasoning? The Supreme Court’s the real joke.”

Marvin hoped that the pause in Frank’s anti-Government diatribe signaled a willingness to change the subject. It was not to be. Frank picked up again in a morose grumble.

“Will Rogers said the difference between death and taxes is that death doesn’t get worse every time Congress meets. He had that right.”

“You spend too much time watching the right-wing talking heads on the Knox News Channel,” Marvin said with a half laugh. “There’s nothing illegal or unconstitutional about requiring health insurance as a way to help the Government control

healthcare. Our Constitution is still in place.”

“But it’s falling apart,” Frank retorted. “Like the big oak tree by your driveway. That tree is probably as old as the country, or almost. It has survived timber cutting all around it, and a civil war, and urban sprawl, and a couple of centuries of bad storms. But time has taken a toll. Some good-size limbs are gone, its trunk is split, and it may be hollow at the base. A particularly ill wind could tip it right on over. Our Constitution can only take so much, too.”

Marvin shrugged. “At any rate, it’s too pleasant out here for us to spoil our morning constitutional by debating the Constitution. Did you notice the ‘sold’ sign in Tommy Paine’s yard?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s moving to somewhere in the Caribbean. He’s got the common sense to leave while he can.” Frank nimbly returned to his topic. “But as I was saying, the President and Congress chip away at our personal freedoms with more and more laws and programs and taxes, and the Supreme Court says it’s all just fine and dandy.”

“You’d feel differently if the Supreme Court struck down a law that you liked,” Marvin said. “Wouldn’t that be evil ‘judicial activism’ in your book?”

“Not if the Court honestly applied the Constitution. Besides, I don’t like many federal laws. Like the old Roman historian Tacitus said, ‘laws were most numerous when the commonwealth was most corrupt.’ Well, we’re chock-full of laws, and the Government is corrupt.”

A dull throbbing commenced behind Marvin’s

ears. He decided to take another stab at channeling the conversation into a lighter vein.

“I heard a joke the other day that you might appreciate, Frank. This guy is talking to his psychologist friend and tells him, ‘The Government says we all have to buy a certain amount of broccoli every month or pay an extra tax, but I can’t stand broccoli.’ And the psychologist says, ‘Listen, you can change your food preferences by either negative reinforcement or positive reinforcement. For example, if you want to learn to resist a dish, you can associate it with some activity you dislike. Eventually you won’t like that food as much anymore. In the same way, if you want to start *liking* broccoli, associate broccoli with something you really enjoy.’ ‘Like what?’ the guy asks. ‘Well,’ says the shrink, ‘every time you eat broccoli, have passionate sex with your wife immediately afterward. Soon, because of the positive association, you’ll start to like broccoli.’ A few weeks later they run into each other again, but the guy is all stressed out. He tells the psychologist: ‘I took your advice about developing a taste for broccoli. It was broccoli, sex, broccoli, sex, just like you said.’ ‘Do you like broccoli now?’ the psychologist asks. ‘Oh, I positively *love* broccoli,’ says the guy. ‘But now my wife *hates* it—and we’ve been barred from our two favorite restaurants.’”

Lex chose that moment to stop and, finally, relieve himself. Frank gave an unenthused chuckle, but Marvin couldn’t tell whether it was in response to the punch line or to the look of relieved

satisfaction on Lex's face.

"Jokes are all well and good," Frank said. "But seriously, the Government's Beneficial Food Directives just prove my point. After ramming its health program down our throats, the Government decided to make us eat our broccoli and other vegetables, too, and to ban bacon and other foods that the Government thinks aren't good for us. All in the guise of *making* us be healthier and happier—only, we're not any healthier, and we're sure as hell not happier."

The muffled notes of an electronic ragtime tune rose from the right front pocket of Marvin's cargo shorts. Marvin removed his cell phone and put it to his ear just as the eighth measure of "The Entertainer" concluded.

"I'm leaving now so I can stop on the way to work to order the new TV," his wife's voice announced.

"The new TV?"

"I told you yesterday. The big new TV we have to buy as part of the Government's Bucks for Screens program, where the Government gives us a tax credit and we have to trade in our smaller TV. Remember?"

"Oh, right. Bucks for Screens."

Frank waved frantically at Marvin.

"No!" Frank blurted. "Tell her no!"

"Wait a second," Marvin said to the phone. He arched his eyebrows at Frank.

"Those new big-screen TVs are a Government trap," Frank warned in an urgent whisper. "Trojan horses. The Government will see and hear

everything you do around the TV. I'm serious!"

Marvin frowned. "Uh . . . huh," he said slowly, with a sideways glance at his friend. He moved the cell phone back to his cheek. "Frank says the Government will be watching us through the big screen."

After a brief silence, Martha's laugh filled his ear.

"Frank's a paranoid old coot," she said.

"Martha says you're paranoid."

"Marvin!" Martha scolded. "I didn't want you to repeat what I said."

"I didn't repeat the 'old coot' part."

"Well, you have now."

"You have now," Frank echoed. "But that's okay. You're only paranoid if you're wrong. I'm not wrong."

"Frank says he's right," Marvin relayed.

Martha sighed. "I really don't have time for this. And we really don't have a choice. The Bucks for Screens program is the law, unless we want to pay an extra tax."

"She said she doesn't have time to listen to your lunatic ranting," Marvin paraphrased.

"Stop it, Marvin!" his wife snapped in his ear. "That's not funny."

Frank snorted. "Whatever. But just remember: I wouldn't do anything risqué with Martha in front of one of those monstrosities. Nothing that I didn't want the Government, and God knows who else, to see."

Marvin cocked his head and squinted at Frank.

"I don't believe Martha would do anything

risqué with you even if you weren't in front of a big TV."

"I wouldn't do what?" Martha demanded.

"Something naughty with Frank in front of the new big TV."

"That's enough. I'm going to run by the grocery store this afternoon on the way home. Do you want anything in particular?"

"Bacon."

"Funny man. Anything legal?"

"Guess not."

Frank lowered his chin to peer at Marvin. He pursed his lips thoughtfully before declaring:

"I can get some bacon for you."

Martha was winding up her call with Marvin. "I'm gone, then," she said. "Bye."

The phone went silent. Marvin returned it to his pants pocket.

"Did she hang up?" asked Frank.

"No. I find that the reception is better if I close the phone and jam it into my pants."

"I'm not blowing smoke about getting the bacon. Or the colonoscopy."

Marvin looked down at Lex before replying.

"I can't be bribed with bacon, Frank."

"Can you be bribed with cash?"

"No."

"Naturally, I knew that." Frank patted Marvin's arm. "That's why I wouldn't try to bribe you with cash, or even with bacon. If I do give you bacon, there won't be any strings attached. It'll be a gift from a friend and neighbor, plain and simple. And if you change my priority number so I can get a

colonoscopy, that will be just a favor for a friend, too.”

Marvin rubbed his chin. “When you put it *that* way,” he said, “it still sounds a lot like a bribe.”

“Not at all, Marvin,” Frank assured him. “Not at all.”

## II

*“Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life’s worst hazards and misfortune. Today, thanks to our Government, no person in this nation must suffer life without a cell phone, and cable television service is no longer an unattainable dream for millions of our less fortunate.” — President Bodvar Olsen, second inaugural address*

“WHAT DID YOU tell Frank about changing his priority number?” Martha asked that night as they settled onto the sofa.

“I tried to tell him no, but he insisted that I think about it.”

“Of course you can’t do it. He should know that. Did Lex have a bowel movement?”

“Finally.”

“How was it?”

“A Great Dane would’ve been proud to claim it.”

“Good. Let’s hope he can keep it up. We need to take him back to the vet if he keeps having problems.”

Marvin pointed the remote control toward the huge new TV that spanned a good portion of the wall opposite them.

“Considering what’s going on in the world,” he said, “what with Iran and its bombs, China cutting

off our credit, and a two-year-long baseball strike, I wonder sometimes which is more troubling: that we talk so much about our dog's intestinal issues, or that we find the subject so darned *interesting*."

Martha squatted to rub the dog's ear. "Poor Lex requires extra attention lately. Now, turn on the TV. I'm glad they were able to install it today."

Marvin pressed a button on the remote. A split-second later, ninety-two diagonal inches of "Advanced LED," "Spectrographic 3-D," "Tru-Tone TV" burst into an awe-inspiring spectrum of glorious color. A life-size man, faintly graying at his temples, strolled hand-in-hand with a pretty and equally life-size woman beside gentle ocean surf. Gulls playfully treaded the air above them with outstretched wings. The three-dimensional effect was so striking that Marvin felt as if the couple's slight smirks were aimed directly at him. It was an erectile dysfunction commercial that he'd seen a number of times on the old TV, but the spot had never before grabbed him like this. He heard Martha take a quick breath.

"Gorgeous," she said. She squeezed his hand. "You know, Marvin, this might be a good night for one of *your* pills."

Marvin's heart skipped a beat. "Are you sure? I mean, they've gone up to seventy-five dollars apiece now, even with the Government insurance."

"I thought they were fifty dollars each."

"That was three months ago. Inflation has been hard on the ED industry."

"Hmm. Pun intended, I'm sure."

"Pun?"

“Anyway, do you have the fast-acting kind?”

Marvin shook his head. “Afraid not. They’re a hundred a pop.”

“Go ahead and take your regular one. We can enjoy this fantastic TV while we’re waiting for the pill to work.”

“You betcha. One penis pill, coming up.”

“Please don’t call it that.”

Marvin hurried to the medicine cabinet in the master bathroom, where he hastily located a plastic pill bottle that rattled playfully with little blue treasures. After some fumbling with the child-proof cap, he popped a pill into his mouth and washed it down with a palmful of water scooped from the faucet stream. Then it was back to the den and the sofa.

“All set?” asked Martha.

“Countdown to liftoff has begun,” Marvin said. He settled back into his place on the sofa, next to Lex. “What’s on?”

“The news.”

In the middle of the screen towered a familiar broad-shouldered man in a gray business suit, a strand of stylishly long blond hair dropping rakishly onto his forehead as he stooped to grasp some of the dozens of small child hands that reached up to him from the bottom of the screen. With the 3-D, it seemed that the man’s hands stretched almost to Marvin’s legs. A disembodied female voice cooed from the surround-sound system. The speaker’s lips could have been in Marvin’s ear.

“ . . . and then the school’s choir treated President Olsen to the world debut of a very special

musical piece.”

Marvin had the distinct impression that the unseen woman’s breath was tickling his neck. He shivered with a thrill of excitement.

“Chilly?” Martha’s hand tightened on his.

“Er, no.”

“Isn’t this TV wonderful?”

The scene switched to several dozen grammar school kids perched on three rows of gymnasium risers. Their earnest faces erupted in a cacophonous melody that was vaguely reminiscent of “Jesus Loves Me”:

*Bodvar Olsen is the best!  
He stands far above the rest.  
He will make our nation strong,  
So we praise him with our song.  
Yes, Bodvar Olsen,  
Yes, Bodvar Olsen,  
Yes, Bodvar Olsen,  
Please make our nation strong!*

“That’s so cute!” said Martha.

Marvin made a wry face, which Martha missed because she wasn’t looking at him.

“Such a great picture,” she beamed. “I feel like I could reach right out and touch one of those children.”

A woman at an anchor desk chuckled appreciatively from the screen.

“Later,” she gushed in a throaty purr, “President Olsen spoke at a ceremony inducting him into the Friends of Norway Hall of Fame, where he blasted

critics of the Government's new food distribution program and national transportation plan. Tomorrow, for his second day around the Big Apple, he's scheduled for a morning golf game on Long Island with the director and stars of the mega-hit *Spiderman 18* movie, followed by a fifty-thousand-dollar-a-plate fundraiser at the home of tycoon George King, an appearance on the Damon Carrier talk show, and, finally, a date with First Lady Livia Olsen for a special command performance of *The Music Man* revival on Broadway. In other news . . . ."

Marvin's whole body jerked at a sharp rapping on the back door.

"Who could that be at this time of night?" Martha asked.

Marvin was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"It may be Frank. I'll see what he wants."

"Don't let him stay too long. Remember, you've taken your pill."

"I'll definitely remember the pill!"

The back door opened to reveal Frank's grizzled face.

"Sorry to intrude on your evening, neighbor," Frank began immediately, though with no visible sign of regret. "I brought you a little something."

"We're watching the new TV. It's pretty impressive. Want to see it—quickly?"

Frank grimaced.

"Of course not. I don't want to show up on some Government spook's surveillance screen. And be *sure* to keep *this* out of sight of the giant boob tube."

Frank's right hand appeared from behind his back, clutching a white-paper package about a foot long and half as wide. He practically thrust the object at Marvin, who mutely accepted it. The wrapping looked like butcher paper. Marvin slowly separated the folds to reveal a marbled slab of tightly compacted bacon strips. His nostrils flared appreciatively at the pungent combination of hickory smoke and raw meat.

"It's ba—!" Marvin almost shouted.

"Shhh!" Frank stopped him urgently. "Keep it down. The TV might hear." His lips curled in a crooked smile. "It's good stuff, I guarantee you. Cuban."

Marvin's stomach growled. "I thought you were joking this morning. Where'd you get it?" he whispered.

"Can't say. And you can't tell anyone where *you* got it, either. Even Martha. Okay?"

"Yeah, but—"

"No more questions. Just enjoy a gift from your good friend. Just a gift, Marvin. Enjoy."

With a parting wink and nod, Frank backed away from the door and disappeared into the night. Marvin stared at the lump of paper and pork. After closing the door, he bobbed the bacon on his palm a couple of times to get a feel for the weight.

"Martha," he said over his shoulder. Realizing that he was still whispering, he raised his voice and called: "Martha! Please come in here."

"What's wrong?"

"I want to show you something."

"Is the pill working already?"

“No. It’s something better than that. Well, maybe not *better*. But something completely different, and good in another way.”

He took the bacon to the kitchen island, where he flattened the wrapping paper to expose the entire slab. At the sound of Martha’s approach, he quickly moved to block her view.

“Close your eyes,” he told her.

“It’s late, Marvin. Please, just show me whatever it is you want me to see and . . . Oh, my God!”

He had stepped aside to expose the bacon with a sweep of his extended hand, like a game show hostess revealing the contents of Door Number One.

“That’s *bacon!*” Martha exclaimed.

“Not *just* bacon, Martha. *Our* bacon.”

Martha touched the meat with a tentative finger, as if wanting to confirm its existence but fearful that a sudden move might make it disappear.

“Where did you get bacon? Was that Frank at the door?”

“Yes. But don’t tell him I told you. You know how he is.”

Something closely akin to a look of lust settled into Martha’s face. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue as if she could already taste the delicious contraband.

“Yes, yes,” she almost panted. “It looks wonderful. How in the world did Frank get it?”

“I have no idea. All he would say is that it’s Cuban.”

Martha’s neck stiffened as a red flush spread over her cheeks. She drew back.

“This isn’t right. You shouldn’t have taken it from Frank. We could get in a lot of trouble for having this—especially you, since you’re a senior executive at DUHL.”

His wife’s abrupt pang of conscience did not faze Marvin. He grinned at her with the giddiness of a teenager holding his first beer.

“Let’s cook it now,” he said, urging her with his eyes. “Let’s just say to *hell* with the Government for a change, and cook the damn bacon, *eat* it, and *enjoy* it! It’s been so long, Martha. So, so long. No one will be hurt. No one will even *know*!”

Martha’s upper body tilted almost imperceptibly toward the bacon, her resistance clearly weakening with each passing second.

“What if someone does find out, though?” she worried.

“No one will find out,” Marvin insisted. “Besides, there’s nothing inherently *wrong* about eating something that we used to eat, and that our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents used to eat, and that non-Jewish people, and non-Moslems, and non-Seventh Day Adventists, and non-members of a few other groups, have eaten from time immemorial ever since the first guy ambushed a wild boar with a heavy rock—until our Government imposed the Bacon Ban and the other Beneficial Food Directives.” He let out a low groan. “For gosh sakes, Martha, it’s just a hunk of pork. It’s not something immoral or unpatriotic simply because the Government decided it makes some people gain too much weight and clogs too many arteries. Let’s fry it and eat it, like we did in

the good old days.”

The silence grew so profound that Marvin could hear a faint nasal whistling, which turned out to be coming from him. At last, his wife nodded, vaguely at first, but with greater conviction as her decision hardened.

“Okay. We’ll do it. We need to close all the blinds in the kitchen. You take care of that while I find a frying pan.”

Marvin closed the blinds as instructed. When he went back to the island, Martha was holding the raw treasure almost against her nose to inhale the aroma.

“Ahhhh,” she moaned. “It smells so good!” A shudder racked her upper body. When she spoke again, her tone was brisk and all business:

“Turn out the lights, Marvin, to make extra sure no one can see past the blinds. I’ve got a flashlight.”

As soon as Marvin hit the switch, a narrow beam from Martha’s flashlight encircled five pieces of bacon that she had peeled from the slab and laid out in the frying pan on the stove eye. The couple gazed upon the strips with the hushed awe of archaeologists beholding a golden sarcophagus by torchlight. Martha broke the spell by turning a knob on the stove. A circle of blue flame erupted.

“Come on, three hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit,” Marvin said anxiously.

“Three hundred and fifty?”

“That’s the best skillet temperature for frying bacon,” he explained. “Although it depends on how fast you want it to cook, and how crisp you like it.”

Cheerful sizzling and popping soon echoed in the darkened kitchen. Just as quickly, the heavenly aroma of frying pork permeated every corner of the room like air rushing to fill a vacuum. The exhaust fan in the top of the range clicked to life with a low hum, but the bacon smell remained powerful.

“I just had a great idea,” Martha announced. She nudged the crackling bacon strips with a large plastic spatula while she held the flashlight in her other hand. “Go to the fridge and get the lettuce and tomato slices that were left over from our soy burgers yesterday, and the mayonnaise substitute, and put some whole-grain bread slices in the toaster.” She giggled. “We’ll have good old-fashioned *BLTs!*”

Marvin felt a sudden urge to nuzzle the nape of her neck, which he did.

“Mmmm,” Martha responded. “Doesn’t this smell great?”

The sandwich preparations proceeded apace.

“Wine,” Martha said. “Why don’t —” The stove’s exhaust fan interrupted her when it revved to a higher speed, sucking away some of the heat that rose from the frying pan. “Why don’t you pour a couple of glasses of wine for us while I fix the sandwiches. Then we’ll be ready!”

“Great idea.”

The light inside the refrigerator blinded Marvin briefly when he opened it. Squinting, he removed a half-full bottle of cheap Malbec and quickly closed the door. Now the kitchen seemed pitch black. He rummaged blindly in a cabinet until his hands found two glasses. On his way back to Martha, his foot

encountered something unexpected on the floor.

"That's my leg," Martha informed him from below. "I've got our plates and sandwiches down here."

She was sitting with her back against a cabinet door next to the oven. Holding the wine bottle in one hand and the glasses in the other, Marvin lowered himself unsteadily. His hip hit the floor with a thud and he almost toppled over, saving himself at the last instant by using his right elbow. Somehow, he managed to hang onto the bottle and glasses.

"Why are we down here?" he wondered aloud, wincing at the pain that shot through his arm. He placed the bottle and glasses on the floor, then rubbed his bruised elbow.

"It just seems like we should . . ." Martha's voice sounded weak. "Like we should, you know, keep our heads down when we eat the . . . the . . . . Oh, let's hurry, Marvin! I've got to have some now!"

Marvin's eyes had readjusted to the gloom well enough that he could make out his wife's shape offering him a plate. He accepted it and sniffed the food appreciatively. Martha already was biting into her sandwich.

"Ummmm!" she gasped through a full mouth. "Itch so goo', Mar'in!"

He chomped into his own stack of bread, bacon, lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise substitute. The first hint of the salty-greasy taste of bacon caused thousands of long-dulled taste buds to explode into frantic activity. Closing his eyes, he savored the

experience like a connoisseur of fine wine relishing his first sip from a glass of DRC La Tâche 1929.

Martha started making strange little guttural noises that sounded to Marvin just like what she did when—

“Marvin!” she gasped. “Mar-vin!”

“Yes?”

“I’m, I’m . . . .” Her breathing grew faster, ragged, almost desperate. Then there was a long, relieved exhalation. “I was choking,” she said when she could once again talk. “It tastes so wonderful, I ate too fast.”

Marvin finished his own chewing while he felt around for the wine bottle and carefully poured liquid into one of the glasses. He handed it to Martha.

“Thanks,” she said. “But . . . .”

“But?”

He sensed that she was struggling to find the words she wanted.

“It’s just that, well, look at us. We’ve gotten so excited about eating bacon that we’re acting like little kids with a stolen box of candy.”

“Damn!” Something cold and wet had stroked the back of Marvin’s hand, the one holding his sandwich. “Sorry, but Lex licked my hand. I think he may have licked part of my sandwich, too. You were saying?”

“Should I give him a piece of bacon?”

“Sure. Maybe it’ll grease his intestinal track a bit.”

“Ouch! He bit my finger. Darn it, Lex!” There was a brief scuffling. “Anyway,” Martha went on,

“how did we get to this point, Marvin, where we have to feel guilty about eating something like bacon?”

“Step by step, Martha.” Marvin pushed a moist dog nose away from his hand. “Step by step.”

“I realize that fatty and salty foods aren’t good for us,” Martha said. “But it’s a free country, isn’t it? I didn’t think too much about it when the Beneficial Food Directives were being enacted, because President Olsen made them seem so reasonable. There were all those studies about how fat and unhealthy we all are. But, did the Government go too far?”

Marvin rested the back of his head against a drawer, shifting to avoid the handle.

“I don’t know. Maybe we didn’t pay enough attention to what was happening.”

The exhaust fan halted. Something about the fan had been worrying Marvin for a few minutes, but he hadn’t been able to put his finger on what it was. It suddenly came to him: the outside vent! He struck his head with the heel of his hand.

“Martha! The exhaust fan has been sucking the bacon smell outside and dumping it down our driveway!”

Martha emitted a muffled cry. Before either of them could rise, a forlorn note pierced the night from in front of the house. The sound grew steadily to a siren-like intensity, filled with a pathetic, bestial yearning. Lex responded with a howl of his own. Marvin scrambled to the dining room window and cautiously parted the blinds. In the glow of the post light at the end of the driveway stood a man

and a Bassett hound, both peering at Marvin's door. Man and dog sniffed the breeze.

"It's the guy from down the street and his dog," Marvin hissed. "One of them was howling."

"Maybe they'll go away soon," Martha answered softly.

After long seconds, the man and dog shuffled along, casting glances back over their shoulders. Marvin returned to the kitchen.

"Gone," he reported. He realized that Martha was gone, too. "Where'd you go?" he called.

"In the den," was the reply from the other room.

Martha had turned off the den lights and was reclining on the sofa in the big-screen TV's flickering aura. Lex yawned at her feet. She sat upright to make room for Marvin, and, when he was in place, she lifted his left arm to drape it around her shoulders.

"You know what?" She leaned into him, her voice huskier than usual.

"What?"

"I don't remember bacon having this kind of effect on me in the past, but it's made me feel a little, um, frisky." She planted a peck on his cheek. "It's wonderfully exciting, like forbidden fruit."

"Prohibited pork. I'll beat you to the bedroom."

Martha smiled but did not move. "No. Let's stay here."

"Here?"

"Yes." Her lips nibbled at his ear lobe. "Here," she murmured. "When we take a breather, we'll cook the rest of the bacon and eat it, while it's late and people and dogs aren't outside to smell it. We

can't leave any in the house, you know. None of it. Is your pill working yet?"

The pill was definitely working. And so was her breath on his ear.

"All systems are—"

Martha's mouth pressed against his.

Out of the corner of his eye, Marvin glimpsed a tiny gleam of light from below the giant TV screen. Silver lettering blazoned the name of the unit's manufacturer: "SANWONG." The interior of the "O" was faintly lit. Frank's words from that morning suddenly streamed through Marvin's mind:

*"Nothing that I didn't want the Government, and God knows who else, to see . . . the Government, and God knows who else . . ."*

Damn the TV, Marvin thought. And to hell with the silly old reactionary next door. It was showtime at the Edwards home.